

FUNNY IN THE FUNNIES:  
THE FORMALIST COMEDY OF COMIC STRIPS

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Funny in the Funnies: The Formalist Comedy of Comic Strips

by

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A thesis submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

English Language and Literature

Memorial University of Newfoundland

May 2012

St. John's

Newfoundland

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### Abstract

Comics is a limited, static, and silent medium; comics artists use visual tools to represent narrative aspects that exist beyond the still-life panels, such as timing, unseen sights, sounds, and diegetic worlds. These visual tools recruit reader expectations about comics: readers must possess a "comics literacy" to understand such tools. The modern comics form began as comedy, dating back to the late nineteenth century and strips such as Richard F. Outcault's *Hogan's Alley*. Despite the comical origin of comics, many comics theorists see comic strips as "essentially . . . illustrated joke[s]" (Kunzle "Voices" 8). These theorists fail to consider that since comics requires a specific literacy, comics comedians can defy this literacy to create jokes that are specific to the medium. Such jokes undermine the visual tools of comics and thereby challenge reader expectations about the form. Comic strips are far from illustrated jokes: they are illustrations and jokes, a century-old comedy form that is inexplicably overlooked.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

It is a dubious testament to the power of comics that the term “comic book” has permeated the English language to the point of being an insult. To say that novels or movies have “comic book plots” is to fault them for their simplicity and conformity to cliché. Worse still is to say that a plot is a joke. The use of “joke” as a derogatory term is common to the point where “trivial” is an accepted meaning for the word. After all, what could be simpler than a joke? Everybody knows when something makes them laugh, so how could anyone not be an expert on humour? To paraphrase René Descartes: I laugh, therefore I know comedy; I think, therefore I understand neurobiology. These definitions of “comic book” and “joke” raise a question: what could possibly be more trivial than jokes in comics?

Answer: the amount of critical study on jokes in comics.

A search of the MLA International Bibliography shows that this (attempted) joke has a valid point: the number of articles written on graphic novels—the serious side of the comics medium—dwarfs the number written on comedy comics. For example, a search for Art Spiegelman’s 1991 graphic novel *Maus* yields 123 results, whereas a search for Gary Larson’s *The Far Side*—a comic strip that ran from 1980 to 1995—yields five. Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, an autobiographical graphic novel published in 2000, has forty-three results on the MLA International Bibliography, while Bill Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes*, a comic strip published between 1985 and 1995, has two. Perhaps most striking of all, Alison Bechdel’s 2006 graphic novel *Fun Home* has fourteen results, while Charles M. Schulz’s *Peanuts*, a strip that ran from 1950 to 2000, has nine.

Yet comics are called “the funny pages” for a reason. From the late nineteenth century, humorous strips accompanying the daily news were popular entertainment. Comics historian Robert C. Harvey records that in the late nineteenth century, newspapers and magazines featured “comical drawings [that] were dubbed ‘comic weeklies’ in common parlance—or, even, ‘comics’” (36). This “comical artwork . . . was increasingly presented in the form of ‘strips’ of pictures” (36), and the



term "comic strip" was born.<sup>1</sup> The comics medium as we know it began in these newspapers, with Richard F. Outcault's *Hogan's Alley* in the *Sunday World* paper in 1895 forming the earliest definite example of comics (Harvey 37, Miller 15). Predating *Superman*, *Batman*, *Spider-Man* and their super friends, comic strips started the form that eventually became known for onomatopoeic violence and blisteringly tight spandex. Despite comics' historical tie to comedy, critical study of the form focuses on weighty graphic novels. However large the medium may grow, the structural conventions of comics nonetheless originate in tools used to convey visual jokes in newspapers.

The notion that comics originates from comedy is not new. Many comics theorists and historians know full well that comedy is the first muse of their form, though they often seek to shirk the legacy of this parentage. Comics historian David Kunzle claims in "Voices of Silence" that many comics are "essentially... illustrated joke[s]" (8), praising later strips that achieve "release from the constraints of the triviality of the joke" (9) and "allow for an expansion into modes of feeling where humor is not predominant" (8-9). Kunzle displays a common attitude among comics scholars, admitting that comedy is comics' past, and hoping that comedy is not comics' sole future. Comics theorist Thierry Groensteen states in "Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?" that one of comics' "symbolic handicap[s] is [its] relationship with humor, caricature, and satire" (10). Groensteen offers an explanation for this handicap, claiming that "humor has been regarded [by the academy] as the opposite of harmony and of the sublime. It is not compatible with beauty and constitutes an inferior genre, barely legitimate" (10). These strong words echo Kunzle's distaste for jokes, offering an explanation for why a recent graphic novel such as *Fun Home* enjoys more critical attention than a landmark comic strip such as *Peanuts*.

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1 To clarify, in this thesis, when I say "comic strips" I mean short (one page or smaller) strips of pictures (usually accompanied with text) that are comic (funny). I will include humorous single-panel cartoons in this definition (such as *The Far Side*), but exclude strips that are not comical (such as *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon*—ostensibly serious comic strips) and multi-page comic books (*Superman*, *Batman*, etc). I will also exclude any comic-like texts that predate the late nineteenth century and the term "comics," such as William Hogarth's satiric prints and Rodolphe Töpffer's *histoires en estampes*. This exclusion of comics' ancestors is solely for the organization of my thesis: I do not wish to engage in the ongoing debate over which historical works constitute "comics." Though my definition may sound arbitrary, it derives from "comic strip," where comedy is at the origin of the term. In addition to "comic strip," I will use the terms "comic book" or "graphic novel" to refer to the multi-page, long-form style, and "comics" as a singular noun meaning the medium as a whole.

Despite this critical disdain for jokes in comics, comics writers and artists often embrace the comedic potential of their medium. The writers and artists of comic strips—whom I will refer to as “comics comedians”—do not only create strips that are “essentially illustrated jokes”; they create strips that are jokes. In other words, comic strips do not merely add images to jokes as Kunzle implies; rather, they are a distinct form of comedy with a unique set of structural conventions. Comics use series of still-life images to tell stories, and comic strips tell jokes the same way. Comics panels represent more than simple illustrations; the static pictures feature visual clues that represent timing, unseen sights, sounds, and diegetic worlds. Comics artists rely on in-panel clues to indicate any non-static, non-silent elements and any visual elements that exist beyond the panel borders. These clues are key components of comics comedy. However, comics comedians do not simply use these clues to tell their jokes; they use these clues as parts of their jokes, resulting in comedy that is fundamentally linked to the comics form. By manipulating the clues that represent the timing, unseen sights, sounds, and diegetic worlds of comic strips, comics comedians create formalist jokes that challenge their audience’s expectations about the structure of comic strips.

This statement raises numerous questions, one of the foremost being: why do challenges to readers’ expectations about comic strips constitute jokes? Or in other words, what do such challenges entail, and why are they funny? In terms of comedy structure (rather than comics structure), these jokes function by suddenly disrupting expectation systems. Comics comedians encourage their readers to make assumptions about their comic strips, and then they shatter those assumptions to cause their readers to laugh (or so they hope). These assumptions take various forms, and they may be encouraged by the strips—such as assumptions about comics symbols—or cultivated within the strips—such as assumptions about diegetic elements. Comics comedians can then “shatter” these assumptions by presenting elements that are incongruous with the assumptions. There are many types of formalist jokes in comic strips, but they all boil down to this basic structure: the jokes alternately encourage and discourage assumptions (and vice-versa). The humour of these jokes comes from their sudden shifts in implications. In the introduction to *What’s So*

*Funny?*, comedy theorist Murray S. Davis says that “those whose expectation system gestalt becomes incomplete or partial may break up into laughter . . . . By replacing only one congruous element with an incongruous element, humor can disintegrate an expectation system. The humorous incongruity disorders what had been ordered, breaking open the frame and scattering its elements” (13). Formalist comics comedy presents humorous formal incongruities that disintegrate expectations about the comics form.

If all formalist comics comedy boils down to this structure, the next question is what defines “formalist” comics comedy? For my purposes, “formalist comics comedy” means jokes that incorporate the structure of comics. “Formalist comics comedy” is a key term for this thesis: it represents the subset of comics comedy that is my focus. The comics form is not simply a tool for telling these jokes; rather, it is a key component of their humour. But then, what is the “comics form”? Briefly, comics provide still-life images that require readers to fill in the blanks; readers understand comics by mentally “completing” the depicted events. Comics theorist Scott McCloud says that a comics reader must “connect [panels] and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (67). This process relies on the reader perceiving—or in other words, assuming—a narrative connection between the images. As McCloud says, two comics images form a coherent narrative when, though “nothing is seen between the two panels... experience tells you something must be there” (67). This “experience” includes the experience of reading comics, as well as experience with events similar to those depicted in the comic. Comics professional Will Eisner makes a similar claim in his book *Comics and Sequential Art*, stating that comics readers must read between the panels and “fill in the intervening events from experience” (38). Even single panel cartoons employ reader completion. As critic David Carrier says, the single-panel comic “often depends upon a viewer’s expectation about how . . . ‘to move’ images” (113): the following image is not so much absent as implied. Comics artists must use clues to imply the existence of any narrative elements that are not visual, stationary, and within the panel borders. I divide these elements into four major categories: time, unseen sights (visual elements that are absent but

implied), sounds, and diegetic worlds (or in other words, the fictional worlds that tie the images together and thereby create narrative coherence). I will divide my study into chapters corresponding to these categories. These four elements are part of almost every comics narrative, yet the medium cannot recreate or simulate them. Because these elements are not visual, fixed, and within the panel, the medium relies on signs or codes to represent or imply them. In other words, comics artists have to rely on visual clues to guide readers to infer—or to assume—the presence of these elements, based on their experience with and expectations of the comics form, and based on their own assumptions that the comics will have coherence. Since the comics form leads readers to imagine timing, unseen sights, sounds and diegetic worlds, challenging these assumptions is the essence of formalist comics comedy.

Timing is an integral part of every comic strip joke, and therefore it is a logical starting point for my analyses of formalist comics comedy. The ambiguity of time in comics has drawn considerable attention from comics theorists<sup>2</sup>; paradoxically, however, comedic timing in comic strips is one of the simplest and most restrictive elements of the form. In a rare academic mention of comedy in comics, Robert C. Harvey says that in humorous cartoons, “as comprehension dawns—in the flash of an instant—the humor is revealed... the joke’s impact derives from the ‘surprise’ that is sprung upon the reader when he or she understands the full import of the picture or the caption” (29). Unfortunately, Harvey’s single digression into humour says very little about comics specifically: many forms of jokes illuminate their material through surprising endings. In *The Sense of Humor*, Max Eastman gives examples of jokes that function through processes of sudden illumination (or disillusionment, depending on the case). He says that to present the subject of a joke with “an advantage, and when our appetite is just reaching out... to grasp that advantage, suddenly to present in the very heart of it the most square and overwhelming *disadvantage*—that is a joke” (35, author’s emphasis). In Eastman’s example, “advantage” and “disadvantage” basically

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2 Critics such as Robert C. Harvey (39), Chris Hatfield (135-144), Scott McCloud (94-117), and Ann Miller (104-105) discuss the ambiguous nature of comics time. For example, Harvey claims that “the sequential arrangement of [comics] panels cannot help but create time in some general way” (39); in other words, even though time is an inescapable element of comics, the medium relies on general—rather than specific—representations of time.

mean "praise" and "insult," but he also mentions that "ridicule is not the original or characteristic kind of comedy or wit" (34); we can abstract "advantage" and "disadvantage" to mean "opposites." Eastman goes so far as to say that in comedy, "there must be no mediation or bridging, no argument necessary... the current must flash when the times comes" (99). Basically, Eastman puts into words what every comedian must eventually learn: that timing in jokes is equal parts precision and clarity. There needs to be a defined moment when the "flash" of comic illumination shines through. Thus, it is not particularly noteworthy that Harvey's comedic timing in comics dawns "in the flash of an instant;" rather, it raises the question of how comics artists convey the flash of the punchline. Comedic timing in comics involves the rate at which the readers perceive the diegetic events of the strips, and this rate depends on the arrangement and amount of visual information in the strips. Comics theorist Chris Hatfield says that "the art of comics entails a tense relationship between perceived time and perceived space" (144), and Will Eisner claims that "the act of paneling or boxing the action... 'tells' time" (28). These statements refer to the foundational relationship upon which comics comedians construct their humorous timing: the organization of the visual space. There are two facts that contribute to the comedic timing of the comics form: one reads the panels in a definite order, and one takes a longer time reading visually complicated strips than reading visually uncomplicated ones. These facts may sound simple; however, the applications—and comical subversions—of these facts are formally complex. While time in comics "all depends on your frame of mind" (McCloud 117), comedy timing needs to have pinpoint accuracy, since if a joke's humour "does not flash, it is not there" (Eastman 99). Chapter Two analyzes how comics comedians time complex visual jokes using simple spatial relations, and how they collapse these relations to create jokes that are based on the structure of comics timing.

Although comics is a visual medium, its limited, static panels cannot display all the visual aspects of its diegetic worlds. Comics is composed of pictures that are static in border and movement; therefore, comics artists use clues to indicate the presence of off-panel visuals. This limitation results in two (relatively) simple forms of reader completion that are important for

comics comedy. An object out-of-panel can be the focus of, or can contribute to, the joke made in the panel. Comics artists can encourage readers to imagine off-panel visual elements by displaying on-panel clues. These clues can take many forms, such as characters looking out of the frames, or noises coming from beyond the image borders. Scott McCloud refers to this form of reader completion specifically as “closure” (63), calling it “the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63). In other words, on-panel visuals synecdochically indicate the presence of off-panel visuals; both the seen and unseen sights are visual elements of the diegetic worlds. Speaking of the dichotomy between seen and unseen visuals, film theorist Bruce F. Kavin states that “the photographer or filmmaker selects a portion of the visible field and records that in a still or shot” (49), and the comics artist records a portion of the visible field in a panel. Closure is not unique to comics, but comics artists use a unique set of tools to encourage readers to achieve closure. Closure can apply to something as simple as part of a character that exists outside a panel (McCloud 61), or a more complicated process of motion that connects one image to the next (66). Movement is the second way that comics encourage readers to imagine visual elements. Aspects of comics panels—such as “motion lines” or blurred images (110-13)—can imply movement, as can multiple renderings of the same scene with relocated characters (110). Comedy theorist Murray S. Davis makes claims that seem to correspond with McCloud’s notion of closure, stating that “if we know the state of one element in a system and the interrelation between all of them, we can anticipate the state of any other element in the system” (13). However, since Davis speaks of humour specifically, he goes on to say that defying such an anticipation can cause “those who had viewed the objective world through this particular subjective frame to laugh” (13). Jokes based on unseen sights (as opposed to those that merely incorporate unseen sights) feature off-panel visuals or actions that defy the strips’ apparent predictions about these elements. Comedy comics must contrive their unseen sights to be both expected and unexpected in order to be both comprehensible and funny. Remarkably, many comics comedians achieve this feat, and Chapter Three analyzes the structural conventions that they use to attain this goal.

The visual sounds of comics strips are more than attention-grabbing ways to signify and mask violence with made-up nonsense words like “zok,” “whammo,” and “catharsis”: they are a unique set of optical symbols representing sounds. Comic strips encourage readers to imagine sounds based on visual clues. Comics is far from the only medium to feature visual representations of sound. Written language has an arbitrary relation to sound, as Ferdinand de Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics*) and semiotics have made clear. De Saussure says that “the signs used in writing are arbitrary; there is no connection, for example, between the letter *t* and the sound that it designates” (972). Text in comics has this same inescapable, abstracted association to sound.

However, in comics these words exist alongside of, inside of, and sometimes even *as* images, conventions that captivate the attention of many critics. Chris Hatfield states that “the process of transitioning, or closure, depends not only on the interplay between successive images but also on the interplay of different codes of signification: the verbal as well as the visual” (138), or more accurately, the textual as well as the pictorial: imaginary sounds are as important to comics narratives as imaginary sights. Sound in comics primarily comes from visual elements such as speech balloons. Robert C. Harvey says that “speech balloons breathe into comic strips their peculiar life . . . . In comic strips, [characters] speak. And they speak in the same mode as they appear—the visual not the audio mode” (38-39). This visual mode of speaking often contains information about audio that is simultaneously precise (text) and vague (style and size of letters, balloons, and more), leading readers to imagine sounds based on visual clues. Adding comedy theory to the mix shows the counter-intuitive yet appropriate function that sound fulfills in funny comics. Murray S. Davis states that language “derives most of its unique humor from *ambiguity* of form, unlike other systems whose main sources of humor are incongruities of content. Language humor is centered in the ambiguous *word*, at the junction between its sound and its meaning” (36, author’s emphasis). Sound in comics is inherently ambiguous, though in a different sense than Davis intends—he speaks primarily about word play, a form of comedy that derives from words having multiple meanings. Rather, comics comedians create sound-based jokes by presenting

symbols that indicate the presence of sounds, but that lack essential information about the sounds. For example, they can play with the origins of sounds by changing the locations of speech balloons, or with the nature of sounds by altering the shapes of the balloons. Or, these jokes may comically refer to the fact that readers cannot literally hear comics sounds, no matter how many visual clues the strips present. Chapter Four analyzes how comics comedians play with their medium's visual symbols of sounds to create sound-based jokes.

Not only do comics call on readers to imagine the timing, unseen sights, and sounds of the strips, they also call on readers to combine these elements into diegetic worlds. Comics are not unique in requiring readers to imagine diegetic worlds, nor are they unique in making jokes at the expense of these imaginary worlds; in comics, however, the execution of these jokes relies on the formal comics conventions. Bruce F. Kawin claims that "the movie audience watches each shot and is led—by the film-maker or by an understanding of basic cinematic conventions—to assemble these parts into a conceptual or spatial whole" (49), and a similar process occurs as the comics audience reads each panel. However, this process occurs with respect to comics conventions, and the sum of these conventions is unique to the comics form. Comics readers imagine representations of timing, unseen sights, and sounds based on visual clues. In turn, readers can combine these diegetic elements to create representations of diegetic worlds, the imaginary spaces where the imaginary elements of comics coexist. The combination of diegetic elements often requires readers to make assumptions about the diegetic worlds; these assumptions may be necessary for the diegetic elements to coexist, or they may merely seem to be necessary, depending on the structure of the joke. Diegesis-based jokes can subvert expectations about the nature of comic strips by questioning assumptions that previously seemed obvious. Since comic strips are fictional, readers likely expect—or assume—that the willing suspension of disbelief is necessary when reading comic strips. Samuel Taylor Coleridge says that the willing suspension of disbelief allows readers "to transfer from [their] inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth" (314), and to ascribe this truth to fictional texts. When readers suspend their disbelief about the fiction of comic strips,



they accept that the diegetic worlds of the strips must allow the timing, sights, and sounds to coexist with one another. Thus, these strips can lead readers to draw assumptions based on the interrelations of diegetic elements; diegesis-based jokes can defy these assumptions and thereby shatter the suspension of disbelief. A fictional text can defy the suspension of disbelief by shirking any “semblance of truth” and acknowledging its own artifice. In comic strips, such jokes involve alternate suspension and promotion of disbelief. Chapter Five shows that diegesis-based jokes in comics are consciously artificial, comically shifting between diegetic and real-world interpretations of the timing, sights, and sounds of comic strips.

In detailing the conventions of formalist comics comedy, I focus my analyses on comics structure rather than on specific primary texts. I choose my individual readings based on their form rather than their cultural significance. However, I focus primarily on comic strips that both influence and reflect conventions from the past century of funny cartooning. The unique language of comics comedy does have its masters, even if they are underappreciated in comics studies. For this thesis I have chosen to study one of the most successful comic strips of the twentieth century, Charles M. Schulz’s *Peanuts*, and two of the best-known strips from the latter half of the century, Bill Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes* and Gary Larson’s *The Far Side*. Additionally, I briefly mention Winsor McCay’s influential 1904 comic strip *Little Sammy Sneeze*, Mort Walker’s long-running comic strip *Beetle Bailey*, and three examples of post-modern cartooning: Art Spiegelman’s avant-garde compilation *Breakdowns*, Matt Feazell’s form-defying strip *The Incredible Mr. Spot*, and Anthony Clark’s webcomic *Nedroid Picture Diary*.

Spanning fifty years and 17,897 strips (Michaels ix), Charles M. Schulz’s *Peanuts* is one of the defining examples of comedy in comics. Comics historian M. Thomas Inge claims that “Schulz’s comic strip draws on rich traditions of creative accomplishments in graphic humor, reflects a whole range of high points in popular culture, and ultimately revives the comic strip form... by demonstrating its versatility in dealing with the social, psychological, and philosophical tensions of the modern world” (101). Over the lengthy run of the strip, Schulz displays what Inge

calls a “world of diminutive characters who are wiser than their years and who stave off the encroachment of reality by rejecting a false rationalism in favor of a healthy appreciation for the absurd and the uncertain” (103). This appreciation for the absurd is a comics convention that Schulz adopts (and expands) from strips such as George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat*, a surrealist comic strip from the early twentieth century that Schulz says “did much to inspire me to create a feature that went beyond the mere actions of ordinary children” (14). While Schulz’s uses of timing, unseen sights, and sounds are noteworthy (and I will discuss them in this thesis), his characters—and the diegetic worlds that they populate—are his most significant comedic tools. Though visually appearing as children, characters such as Charlie Brown and Linus van Pelt experience worries and existential crises worthy of the most introspective adults, and the happy-go-lucky beagle Snoopy oscillates between begging for dog food and writing novels from a typewriter perched atop his doghouse. Is Snoopy a person who happens to be a dog, a dog who thinks he’s a person, or neither? Schulz never answers this question, leaving his readers to make assumptions about the (apparent) coherence of the strip’s unexplained fictional world. *Peanuts*, then, is one of the foremost examples of intentionally ambiguous diegetic worlds, forcing readers to assume formalist elements in ways few other strips can manage.

Saying that few—rather than “no”—other strips can force readers to assume formalist elements like *Peanuts* can be a necessary qualifier in light of Bill Watterson’s comic strip, *Calvin and Hobbes*. Watterson says that “three comic strips have been tremendously inspirational to me: *Peanuts* by Charles Schulz, *Pogo* by Walt Kelly, and *Krazy Kat* by George Herriman” (17), and his comic strip continues the comedic mode used by Schulz and his predecessors. However, like the rebellious child Watterson’s strip depicts, *Calvin and Hobbes* defies its ancestor *Peanuts*, eschewing regular layouts in favour of varying, elaborate designs. Watterson’s comic layouts form interesting examples of comedic timing in comic strips. Watterson states that “the prevailing Sunday format was invented to standardize comic strip layouts so as to give newspapers the utmost flexibility in printing them” (14), a source of frustration for Watterson who claims that “it frequently made for an

ugly, graceless strip" (14). After fighting the syndicate that distributed *Calvin and Hobbes* and winning the ability to organize his strips for himself (Watterson 14-16), Watterson became like Calvin in a candy store, creating many strips with atypical designs. Though certainly interesting for unseen sights, sounds, and diegetic worlds, *Calvin and Hobbes* interests me above all for its comic manipulation of time, presenting intricate comic designs which boil down into simple and effective mechanisms of comedy timing.

Gary Larson's *The Far Side* is not only one of the best known comedy comics of the twentieth century, it also offers a surreal take on the classic form of the one-panel cartoon. Larson operates in a form descended from the cartoons of the *New Yorker* magazine. M. Thomas Inge says that in the *New Yorker* cartoons, "both picture and caption had to work together simultaneously to achieve a total effect which neither would have done alone" (111); the publication "marked a singular new development in the history of graphic humor" (111). This development continues in *The Far Side*, a comic where implausible images and deadpan captions frequently unite to yield jokes that neither words nor pictures could represent alone. The single-panel format of *The Far Side* is a structural tool rather than a limitation. Larson himself states that in *The Far Side* he "implies what is about to happen, thereby heightening both the tension and (hopefully) the humor" (136, author's emphasis). Larson leaves readers to imagine—or to assume—the upcoming events based on the visible information, mirroring artistic techniques mentioned in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's essay "Laocoön." Lessing states that a painter "can use only a single moment of an action... and must therefore choose the one which is most suggestive and from which the preceding and succeeding events are most easily comprehensible" (566). Larson's strips frequently feature such suggestive images, using them to imply preceding or succeeding actions. Though (almost always) drawn as a single panel, *The Far Side* is full of implied sights and sounds, using understated timing to "create that perfect marriage between the drawing and the caption" (Larson 141). Larson says that he uses "nuances and subtleties in both the drawing and the caption" (134) to create comic strip versions of "timing, voice inflection, delivery, body language, etc." (134). *The Far Side* reads like a

catalogue of cartooning techniques that encourage readers to imagine timing, unseen sights, sounds and diegetic worlds based on subtle formalist clues.

Comics criticism is a young (but growing) field in the academy, and most theorists deal with formal conventions at some point. Indeed, there is still no scholarly consensus as to what formal mechanisms actually define the medium, as evidenced by the ongoing debate over what constitutes "comics" (Miller 14, McCloud 15, Harvey 25, Groensteen 124, to list a few). In "The Impossible Definition," Thierry Groensteen says that "the definitions of comics that can be found in dictionaries and encyclopedias, and also in the more specialized literature, are, as a general rule, unsatisfactory" (124). Groensteen cites numerous "formulas that suggest some part of the truth" (124): comics theorist Alain Rey defines the medium as "a creative battle between figuration and narrativity" (qtd. in Groensteen 124), comics researcher Bill Blackbeard states that a comic is "a serially published, episodic, open-ended dramatic narrative... told in successive drawings regularly enclosing ballooned dialogue" (41), and David Kunzle goes so far as to claim that a comic "must be a sequence of separate images... must be a preponderance of image over text... must be reproductive... [and] must tell a story which is both moral and topical" (*Early* 2). Many prominent comics theorists have their own definitions for "comics." This debate over comics' definitional limits is the primary area of comics theory that I do not deal with in this thesis. Despite the lack of a defined border surrounding the formal conventions of comics, there is a consensus that these conventions are essential and often unique to this medium, leading the majority of comics theory to include at least a few formalist elements. I also mention related formalist criticism in fields such as film theory and visual design. I do not seek to exhaust the potential applications of these disciplines to comic strip criticism; rather, I seek to contextualize my cited comics theory in a larger academic field, showing that many formal aspects of comics mirror formal aspects of other visual media. Comics has a unique set of structural conventions, and therefore formalist theory that relates to one aspect of comics does not necessarily apply to the medium as a whole. I acknowledge these sources only with respect to individual comics conventions, and only when they express very close parallels

with the formal mechanisms of comics.

Whereas formalist criticism is almost the norm for comics theory, for comedy theory it is something of a recent development. As comedy critic D.J. Palmer states in his introduction to *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*, it is only in the twentieth century that “there has been a growing interest in the formal conventions and traditions of the genre [of comedy]” (16). Many intellectuals from before the twentieth century—such as Aristotle (*Poetics*), Charles Baudelaire (*The Painter of Modern Life*), and Henri Bergson (*Le Rire*)—define comedy not by its formal conventions, but by the subject matter that it metaphorically represents. For example, Aristotle claims that “comedy is... a representation of people who are rather inferior... the laughable is a sort of error and ugliness that is not painful and destructive” (94). Baudelaire expands on Aristotle by stating that humour “produce[s] in the spectator, or rather the reader, a joy in his own, superiority” (164). Bergson presents a more complex view of comedy, stating that humour “softens down whatever the surface of the social body may retain of mechanical inelasticity... unconsciously (and even immorally in many particular instances) it pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement” (63). These critics define comedy as a metaphoric expression of error, ridicule, and social improvement respectively. Comedy theorist Scott Cutler Shershow claims that these “critics turn toward metaphor in a doomed effort to define the indefinable, but in the end, all jokes wiggle free from definition, turning the very act of analysis into one more incongruity” (3). Historian of comedy theory Jan Walsh Hokenson agrees that such metaphorical appraisals of comedy are inherently flawed, stating that “alongside that historical axis of revising Aristotle and the inherited idea of comedy... through different cultures, periods, and languages, comedy seems to have both enthralled and baffled the mind in equal measure” (15). Metaphorical theories of comedy may adequately summarize certain varieties of humour, but they do not define the totality of comedy, nor do they offer insight into the structure of jokes. In using comedy theory I look at formal rather than metaphorical reasons for why comics jokes are funny. I use those aspects of comedy theory—like comics theory—that analyze formal conventions.

My primary source of formalist comedy theory is Murray S. Davis's *What's So Funny?*, an insightful look into "the significance of humor for cultural and social theory" (xiii). Davis justifies his focus on comedy by stating that humour "may seem trivial, but it provides an inconspicuous back entrance to a person's, group's, or society's innermost chamber, which continually knocking on their front door may never disclose" (2). Davis constructs his book as a "scientific analysis of humor" (3), and Davis's scientific methods are useful for my thesis. Davis says that such a scientific analysis must incorporate a "respect for the underlying systems" (3) of comedy, and he details these underlying systems before incorporating them into his analyses. Like Davis's book, this thesis is a scientific analysis of humour; as such, Davis's explanations of the comedy form are relevant for my discussions of formalist comics comedy. I borrow several of these explanations, using them as theoretical stepping stones in my analyses.

Comic strips are far more than illustrated jokes; they are a distinct comedy form. Comics comedians manipulate and twist their medium's tools for representing diegetic elements, resulting in jokes that challenge their audiences' expectations about the form. I study the intersecting language of comics and comedy by applying formalist theory to selected strips from Schulz's *Peanuts*, Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes*, Larson's *The Far Side*, and a few supporting examples from other comic strips. I draw my own conclusions about the comedic uses of timing, unseen sights, sounds, and diegetic worlds in comic strips, generating methods for critically understanding these formal conventions of humorous comics. In the end I show that comic strip comedy is complex and nuanced, and no joke.

## Chapter 2: Timing

### Section 2.1: Introduction

Time is an essential element of jokes and comics, and therefore it is a logical place to begin my analysis of jokes in comics. Despite being a sensible starting point, the intersection of comics and comedy timing is anything but simple. The still-life images of comics hint toward the time that passes between them, and jokes require precision timing for maximum effect. These two statements appear contradictory, and may even seem to defy the possibility for comedy in comics. Of course, over a century of funny cartooning shows that comic strip jokes are possible, and therefore comedic timing must exist in comics. Comics artists can control the arrangement and amount of strip elements, thereby affecting the reader's pace. In order to "get" the joke of a strip, the reader has to comprehend the two main parts of the joke: the setup and the punchline. Comics comedians can thus "time" their jokes by manipulating the location and duration of the setup and punchline, using the structure of comics to create a unique form of comedic timing. Joke timing in comic strips depends on the arrangement and quantity of information present.

Jokes that play with the conventions of comics timing intentionally complicate the arrangement and quantity of information in the strips; however, these jokes are few and far between. Timing-based jokes—or "mistimed jokes"<sup>3</sup> for short—are rare strips where the comedy focuses on the timing mechanisms. These strips work by humorously defying the conventions of comics timing. For example, their punchlines may encourage readers to re-read the panels in reverse order, or their setups may present high quantities of information that their punchlines conspicuously ignore. However, mistimed jokes always subvert the techniques of comics timing, and therefore my discussion of comedy timing in comics examines these techniques before analyzing mistimed jokes. Most comics jokes display the timing conventions that comics comedians use to create humour, whereas mistimed jokes display how comics comedians can disrupt these conventions to create humour.

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3 The label of "mistimed jokes" does not imply any mistake or error on behalf of the joke teller; rather, it refers to the fact that these jokes hinge around atypical and unexpected timing.

All comics jokes necessarily incorporate elements of comedy timing; timing is one of the essential aspects of comedy, part of the foundation of humour. Comedians lead audiences toward humour like donkeys to water, but they must clearly indicate when and where the asses can drink. In comedy parlance the leading is called the "setup" and the indication is called the "punchline," terms that establish an appropriate (if confrontational) parallel between telling a joke and landing a blow. While not every joke is metaphorically violent enough to feel like a comedic "punch," the punchline is still the part of the joke that makes the rest of the material funny, releasing the humour that builds during the setup. In *What's so Funny?*, Murray S. Davis provides a succinct summary of the basic structure of jokes, stating that "a real incongruity that deviates from prediction will collapse an orderly expectation system" (13), and such a collapse can be the punchline of a joke. In many cases, the setup establishes the "orderly expectation system" and the punchline is the "real incongruity." Like a punch in boxing, this twist has to come at the correct instant or its entire force will be lost. If the punchline comes too soon, the setup might not have built enough of an expectation system for the incongruity to be funny; if it comes too late, the audience may lose interest. Worse still, if the timing of the punchline is vague or gradual, the orderly expectation system may progressively change instead of comically collapse. Max Eastman addresses proper timing in his laws of comedy, stating that in a joke's punchline the humour "must flash when the time comes" (99). In other words, in joke timing it is essential for the "real incongruity" to be sudden and obvious. The instant of the punchline must spark the comedy of the joke, and jokes in comic strips are no exceptions to this rule.

Time applies to comics both through the implied diegetic time and through the time it takes for readers to read them. The diegetic passage of time in comics is rarely (to never) precise, but depends on visual clues that readers must interpret. Common actions, such as speaking a sentence or opening a door, can provide rough senses of duration, but even these events require some chronological approximation. Comics artists frequently use structural hints toward the durations of scenes, and Scott McCloud details a few of them in *Understanding Comics* (100-101). McCloud



shows numerous formal techniques that comics artists can use to affect time, such as repeating similar panels, widening the gutters (the blank spaces between panels) and widening the panels themselves (101). However, as McCloud admits, these techniques only provide “the *feeling* of greater length” (McCloud 101, author’s emphasis). Summarizing the inherent approximations in comics time, McCloud states that “as our eyes are moving through space, they’re also moving through time—we just don’t know by how much” (100). Following from McCloud’s theories of comics time, Robert C. Harvey approaches time in comics by focusing on the spatial order of images. Harvey states that “the sequential arrangement of panels cannot help but create time in some general way, but skillful manipulation of the sequencing can control time and use it to dramatic advantage” (39)—and, indeed, to comedic advantage as well. Harvey states that “the sequencing of panels controls the amount and order of information divulged as well as the order and duration of events” (39). Even so, the duration of events requires reader approximation. However, Harvey’s other claims indicate the timing technique that forms the foundation of comics comedy: controlling the order and amount of information and events.

It is important to differentiate between time and timing, even though neither McCloud nor Harvey state this distinction in their analyses. Time in comics is an element of the diegesis. The passage of comics time may be inexact, but diegetic time nonetheless depends primarily on the narrative and the reader’s assumptions about the narrative (the durations of events). Timing, however, involves the rate at which the reader perceives the text, a product of how comics artists articulate the diegesis, not of the diegesis itself. Like a director changing film speed, comics comedians can alter the order and amount of information to alter the timing of strips independently of the diegetic time. My analyses will be largely unconcerned with diegetic time. Rather, the structural tools that comics comedians use to influence the reader’s perception of comics timing will be my focus.

Readers cannot be completely sure of the duration of any event in a comic strip, but this uncertainty is (largely) irrelevant to the comedy. Though this claim may seem absurd at first, its

veracity can become clear by examining a simple textual joke, such as the immortal “why did the chicken cross the road?” The (usual) punchline of this joke—“to get to the other side”—is funny because it provides an unexpectedly matter-of-fact response. For timing purposes, it does not matter how long it took the chicken to cross the road—the diegetic time (insofar as a joke this simple has a diegesis) is irrelevant. What matters for the timing is how long it takes between the audience hearing the setup (a chicken crossed a road) and the punchline (why it crossed). Comic strip jokes are certainly more complex than this one, but at the root their timing functions similarly: what matters is not the durations of the events, but rather how long it takes the audience to understand said events. Or, in other words, joke timing deals with time for the telling of the jokes as opposed to time for the story. While no comics author can be sure how long it will take an individual to read a comic strip, he or she can be sure that reading rate is directly related to the amount of information present in a strip.<sup>4</sup> The more information that a comic strip communicates, the longer the setup and the slower the joke. Thus, though diegetic time in comic strips may be vague, precise comedic timing comes from the arrangement and amount of information that the strip presents.

## Section 2.2: Arrangement of Information

It may seem obvious to state that the arrangement of information affects the timing of comic strips; however, the interrelation between timing and visual orientation is more complex than it may first appear. The arrangement of panels in comics is usually intuitive, progressing from top-left to bottom-right (for strips in languages where the reading eye travels left to right). Most strips use panel borders to separate distinct moments in time, proceeding from setups to punchlines. I will briefly detail the timing of two such straightforward strips, displaying the basic rules of comic strip timing through examples. These rules are relatively simple: comic strips are ordered combinations of comics elements (panels, captions, etc) and of comedy elements (setups and punchlines). Though

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4 In comic strips more than other media, there is certainly a possibility of readers skimming and missing information (such as details of pictures). However possible this skimming may be, my analysis does not need to take it into account. I will always assume that readers “read” every element of comic strips, just as analyses of prose texts clearly assume that readers do not skip words.

all comic strips rely on these timing rules, not all strips use them in straightforward manners. Some strips—such as single-panel cartoons—may appear to lack any definite order for their visual elements, and other strips may intentionally defy the top-left to bottom-right arrangement of information, seemingly directing readers backwards and forwards through time. Mistimed jokes can collapse “standard” comics timing, presenting strips that intentionally complicate the arrangement of information. In other words, mistimed jokes conspicuously ignore the rules of comics timing. The arrangement of information is one of the most basic elements of comics timing, and complicating this element can result in mistimed jokes.

In essence, comics consist of juxtaposed visual elements; therefore, it is unsurprising that the arrangement of these elements affects the timing of comic strip jokes. Each comics panel is “a moment in sequence” (Hatfield 144) and “a design element that contributes to the overall balance (or in some cases the meaningful *imbalance*) of the layout” (Hatfield 144, author’s emphasis). The spatial orientation of a comic strip guides the reader through the necessary joke elements before reaching the punchline. The punchline is thus the final aspect of any comic strip joke (though not necessarily the final element of the strip itself—a strip could continue past its joke, perhaps for the purpose of building story or character). Comics joke timing follows a path along the strip layout, passing through the setup and toward the punchline. Comics comedians must plot this path using visual techniques, taking the trouble to ensure that readers have the knowledge to appreciate the jokes.

Effective comedy timing must be definite and clear, and therefore comics comedians must rely on unambiguous spatial orientation to time their jokes. Panels proceed in an inter-panel order that is relatively straightforward and that mirrors the reading order for written text. This timing mechanism forms the groundwork for comics comedy: scenes to the left come before scenes to the right. Panel progression is one of the most fundamental elements of timing in comics, and therefore it is a logical starting point for my analysis of comics joke timing.



Fig. 2.1. Schulz Plate 27, Curve Ball.

The *Peanuts* strip from June 30, 1968 (Schulz Plate 27, ["Curve Ball"], fig. 2.1) uses simple panel breakdowns to convey comedic timing. The timing for the visual changes between panels relies on the separation of the images. For example, the arrivals of the hatless child in panel six and the dark-haired child in panel seven occur with the panel transitions. Thanks to the overall order of the panels, and to the fact that these characters' locations are vacant in the previous panels (panel four for hatless and panel six for dark-haired, showing that they are not constantly present as off-panel elements<sup>5</sup>), it is clear that the hatless child joins the group on the pitcher's mound first, and the dark-haired child second. For the purpose of analyzing the panel progression, I am not particularly concerned with why this comic is funny. It will suffice to say that the increasing number of children present builds the joke that Charlie Brown is oblivious to the growing discussion that is happening around him. Furthermore, the panel separation helps break the strip into distinct moments, and this distinction is essential to the punchline. Charlie Brown's punchline

5 I will analyze the comedic properties of off-panel elements in the next chapter.

responds to Linus's statements in panels three and nine, ignoring the dialogue in panels four to eight. The separation between the final panel and the preceding conversation makes it clear that the blank faces on the children in the final panel result from Charlie Brown's response to Linus, not the property value conversation. The children in the final panel react to Charlie Brown's speech in that panel, his comically oblivious punchline. Their reactions augment the comedy of the punchline, showing their surprise at Charlie Brown's response to Linus. Timing based on panel progression is relatively simple, and this simplicity makes it a valuable tool for comics comedians.

Comic strip panels do not only progress through distinct moments in time; they also progress through distinct elements of jokes. Like any joke, a comic strip is split into two primary components: a setup and a punchline. However, unlike many other forms of comedy (such as spoken jokes), the setups and punchlines of comic strips exist contemporaneously; in other words, the setups and punchlines appear alongside one another at the same moment in time. Comic strips are not only series of small images; they are also larger images composed of series of small images. These larger images contain setups and punchlines simultaneously, apparently complicating comics joke timing: how can comics comedians insure that their audiences read their punchlines after their setups? They cannot; comics artists cannot control their readers. However, in order to time their humour, comics comedians can rely on the universal property of jokes: they require both setups and punchlines. To continue with the same example from earlier, in order for the phrase "to get to the other side" to be a punchline, it requires a setup such as "why did the chicken cross the road?" The punchline is not a joke without the setup (and vice versa). Casual readers may consider punchlines to be more significant than setups, since punchlines are the metaphorical sparks that ignite laughter. However, though the punchline is the spark for comedy, the spark is pointless without the fuel that the setup provides. As comedy theorist Scott Cutler Shershow says, "in jokes, as so often in life, getting there is half the fun" (5), and the setup allows readers to get to the punchline. Skipping ahead is self-defeating: if a reader wants to "get" a comic strip joke, he or she must eventually read both the setup and the punchline. Comics comedians can use this essential combination of setup and



Fig. 2.2. Schulz Plate 26, *Blanket*.

punchline to help provide precise timing for their strips.

The *Peanuts* strip from June 23, 1968 (Schulz Plate 26, ["Blanket"], fig. 2.2) illustrates that the combination of setup and punchline is a foundational element of comic strip timing. This strip is structurally simple, but it nonetheless relies on the audience reading both the setup and punchline. The setup begins with Charlie Brown asking Linus, "Don't you ever get tired of that blanket?" (panel three).<sup>6</sup> Linus proceeds to turn the blanket into a paper—or rather, cloth—airplane, sending it flying around himself and Charlie Brown (panels four to seven). He then responds to Charlie Brown by saying "not really!" (panel eight), a punchline that comically downplays his surprising feat of textile aeronautics. This strip relies on the reader understanding both the setup and the punchline. For instance, if a reader skips from panel three ("Don't you ever get tired of that blanket?") to the

6 I say that the setup "begins" in panel three due to publishing constraints imposed on comics artists. As Bill Watterson states, comic strip publishers (mainly newspapers) from the 1940s through 1990s held the rights to reformat strips as they pleased, and many insisted on being able to eliminate the entire top row from Sunday strips (Watterson 14-15). This publishing constraint led to detail-light title panels and short "throw-away" jokes at the beginning of Sunday strips. With the exceptions of Watterson's strips after gaining control of his format, none of the *Peanuts* or *Calvin and Hobbes* Sunday strips that I will cite have essential elements in the top row of panels. (As a single-panel cartoon, *The Far Side* was unaffected by this publishing constraint.) However, in my citation of comics panels, I will still include the top row in the numbering scheme, with the title panel being panel one.

punchline ("Not really!"), he or she sees a dry exchange rather than a joke. In order to "get" the joke, readers do not necessarily need to examine every element of every panel; however, they must understand that Linus performs an astounding feat with this apparently ordinary blanket. In other words, the reader must understand the setup—Charlie Brown's question and Linus's action—before the punchline can finish the joke. Thus, the order of information plays a key role in the timing for this simple joke: the setup must come before the punchline, since without the setup the intended punchline is not a punchline.

Multi-panel comics such as "Blanket" often feature simple divisions between setup and punchline; however, single-panel comics such as *The Far Side* often feature more complex arrangements of information. Despite this complexity, single-panel comics still adhere to the same rule as multi-panel comics: they require both setups and punchlines. In a brief mention of visual design in comic strips, visual theorists Gunther Kress and Leo van Leeuwen state that many strips "offer the reader a choice of reading path, and . . . leave it up to the reader how to traverse the textual space" (222). Larson's single-panel comics are such strips. Though elements of individual *Far Side* cartoons may be more prominent than others, these strips ultimately let the audience decide how to read them. However, these strips are not without visual logic. Kress and Leeuwen continue that such "non-linear texts... select the elements that can be viewed and present them according to a certain paradigmatic logic" (223). In comic strips, this logic is one of setup and punchline, or more specifically, of the fact that jokes require the combination of setup and punchline. However, the labels of "setup" and "punchline" are problematic in single-panel strips, since these cartoons are synchronic fields with no designated reading orders. As film theorist James Monaco says, "we know how to read a page—in English, from left to right and top to bottom—but we are seldom conscious of how precisely we read an image" (125). The comedy timing of single-panel jokes must allow for many potential reading orders.

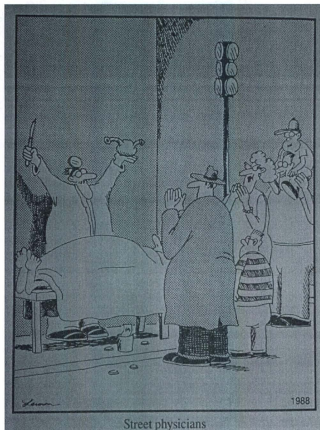


Fig. 2.3. Larson 90, *Street Physicians*.

Larson allows for a plurality of reading orders by splitting the integral information of his jokes between distinct visual elements, often in the form of images and captions. For example, one single-panel *Far Side* cartoon shows a doctor removing a patient's organ on a street corner in front of several applauding people, followed by the caption "Street physicians" (Larson 90, ["Street Physicians"], fig. 2.3). The defined elements in the image are a traffic light, the clapping crowd, a can with money and change around it, and the doctor with a knife, organ and patient. None of these elements are extraneous, but rather they establish part of the information that is necessary to understand the joke. The traffic light shows that the setting is a street, the doctor's garb, patient and organ make it clear that this is some kind of medical procedure (or at least a convincing facsimile thereof), and the doctor's pose, the clapping people and the can of cash show that this is a



performance. As the readers comprehend this image, they come to understand the situation: a doctor is performing medicine in front of an audience in a street. For the purposes of timing, I am not as concerned with why this cartoon is funny. I will detail the nuances of action-based comedy more in the next chapter, but for now it will suffice to say that this operation is comical because it is clearly out of place on a sidewalk. Since the action is incongruous with its context, the reader (probably) expects that the caption will explain why the image presents something so silly. The caption refers to the confusing action but conspicuously fails to dispel the confusion, presenting a pun on "street musicians" instead. This lack of illumination is a deviation from prediction that causes the audience to laugh, or perhaps groan. The image establishes the scene, the caption refers to the scene, and the combination of image and caption makes the joke. In other words, the image and the caption are the two essential components of this joke. Since "Street Physicians" relies on the combination of image and caption, either element can set up the other as a punchline, depending on the reading path that a spectator chooses. Regardless of the reading order, the spatial division between the image and caption times the joke by separating its constituent elements. Single-panel comic timing mirrors the painting timing that visual theorist John Berger details in *Ways of Seeing*. Berger says that, "In a painting all its elements are there to be seen simultaneously. The spectator may need time to examine each element of the painting" (26). The spectator of "Street Physicians" needs time to examine the image and the caption; only then can he reach a conclusion and understand the joke. Larson splits the essential comedy elements of "Street Physicians" into its image and caption, ensuring that readers can only get the joke after reading both of its distinct elements.

All comics exist as images on pages, and thus page layouts are some of the most important arrangements of information in comic strips. Even single-panel cartoons like "Street Physicians" use page layouts to help time the setups and punchlines of their jokes: the image combines with the caption to make the joke. In multi-panel strips, the jokes usually involve top-left panels preceding the bottom-right ones (as in my example of "Curve Ball"), and thus the setups in the top-left precede the punchlines in the bottom-right (as in my example of "Blanket"). This order is intuitive

for English-language strips. However, “intuitive” does not mean “inevitable”; comics comedians can make jokes by consciously subverting the “normal” order of comics panels. Such strips are mistimed based jokes: their comedy relies upon suddenly challenging the anticipated arrangement of elements. A mistimed joke can present an incongruous—or atypical—panel order, disrupting the anticipated order of top-left to bottom-right. Such jokes feature setups that seemingly follow the normal order for comics elements, and punchlines that humorously collapse this order. These jokes rely on the fact that the comic strip is a complex visual unit, capable of directing readers in unexpected ways.

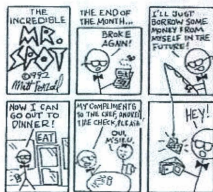


Fig. 2.4. Fezell, Borrow.

Mistimed jokes can defy linear timing by presenting atypical panel orders, making interrelations between images into the focus of the comedy. An example of such a joke comes from one of Matt Fezell’s *The Incredible Mr. Spot* strips, originally printed as an illustration in Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (qtd. in McCloud 105, [“Borrow”], fig. 2.4). “Borrow” times its joke using an atypical panel order. Strapped for cash, Mr. Spot decides to “borrow some money from myself in the future,” extending a fishing line from panel three into his wallet in panel six. The atypical interaction between panels three and six is the incongruity that makes “Borrow” into a mistimed joke; however, this interaction is not the punchline until the audience finishes reading the setup. The visual connection between panels three and six may encourage readers to view panel six before panels four and five. However, without the information of panels four and five, the

interrelation between panels three and six only seems to display Mr. Spot borrowing money from himself; it is a comical illustration of Mr. Spot defying comics timing, but it is not yet a punchline. Panels four and five reveal that Mr. Spot intends to use his borrowed money to pay for a meal. These panels provide important elements of the setup, allowing readers to view panel six—and its interrelation with panel three—in a different light. Panel six shows that a fishing line from above is stealing Mr. Spot's dinner money, encouraging readers to look up and review panel three.<sup>7</sup> Panel three then reveals that Mr. Spot does not only borrow money from himself: he cyclically borrows the same money that he previously borrowed in order to pay for his dinner. Mr. Spot's plan foils itself, presenting not only a challenge to diegetic time, but a challenge to timing as well. The non-linear interrelation between panels three and six makes the combination of panels three and six into the punchline of the joke. Like any punchline, it depends on its setup: panels one through six. In other words, the combination of panels three and six is the punchline, but only after reading the entirety of the strip. This claim echoes John Berger's statements about paintings and timing that I quote in my analysis of "Street Physicians." Berger says that "whenever [the spectator] reaches a conclusion, the simultaneity of the whole painting is there to reverse or qualify his conclusion" (26), and the punchline of "Borrow" relies on this simultaneity. Comic strips are large images that are separated into smaller images by panel borders; the arrangements of these borders indicate orders and temporal progressions for the visual elements. In other words, comics panels impose diachronic orders on synchronic fields, and mistimed jokes such as "Borrow" point out that comics panels exist simultaneously, despite what the panel borders may imply. "Borrow" depends on leading the audience from panel six back to panel three, showing how comics comedians can use collapse expectations about comics timing for the sake of comedy.

"Borrow" may appear to refute the idea that reading order is the foundation of comedy timing in comics. The strip challenges the normal order of the panels, pointing readers from panel three to panel six (and vice-versa). However, it is important to note that this comic *challenges* the

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7 Or to recall the memory of panel three; the effect on the joke timing is the same.

*normal* order of the panels. “Borrow” focuses on atypical timing, which is a comical element of its mistimed joke. This strip does not show that spatial timing is invalid in comedy comics; rather, it shows that there are no absolutes in comedy. At the risk of sounding clichéd, one may say that comedy rules exist to be broken. Once a comedian and an audience agree upon a rule, blatant disregard for said rule can lead to a clever joke. As comedy theorist Susan Purdie says, “funniness involves at once breaking rules and ‘marking’ that break, so that correct behaviour is implicitly instated; yet in transgressing *and* recognizing the rules, jokers take power over rather than merely submitting to them” (3, author’s emphasis). “Borrow,” and other mistimed jokes like it, are humorous exceptions that can only exist because of the rule. Spatial timing is foundational to comics comedy, and challenging this foundation can result in mistimed jokes.

### **Section 2.3: Quantity of Information**

Though comics artists cannot determine the actual amount of time that it takes for a reader to comprehend a strip, authors can control the timing proportionally: the more information in a strip, the longer it takes someone to read it. For example, while a prose writer may not know how long it will take a given person to read 1000 words, this writer certainly knows that it takes longer to read 2000 words. Likewise, a visually simple strip has a quicker timing than a visually complex one, even though the author cannot dictate the timing (as someone telling a spoken joke could, for instance). Pinpoint timing is essential for humour, since in jokes the moment of the comedy must be crystal clear. Therefore, comics comedians must use definite and unambiguous strip elements to time their jokes. The amount of information present in a strip is one such element: a higher density of detail always translates into a slower timing. The “density” of detail depends on the quantity of information and the visual space available; the more information and the less space for that information, the higher the density. Mistimed jokes can manipulate the density of information for laughs, but all comics jokes necessarily possess densities of information, since they all display information in space. Thus, comedic timing in comics relies heavily on the quantity of information

present in a strip.

Timing based on the amount of detail is not unique to comics, and exists in other narrative forms. Robert C. Harvey mentions a comics technique similar to one of McCloud's strategies for slowing down diegetic time, stating that "action can be slowed down by sequences of pictures that focus minutely on each aspect of a developing action in the manner of a slow motion camera" (39). This "slow motion" style of comics affects comedic timing, providing more information about the action in the form of more images of the action. A slow-motion camera does not affect diegetic time either; rather, it changes the speed at which the audience perceives the movement. Though unlike film, comics cannot directly control the rate at which the audience sees the action, increasing the quantity of visual information in comics panels creates an effect similar to a slow-motion camera. The timing of a strip comes from the number and complexity of its panels. More images and more details in the images make for slower timing (and fewer details makes for quicker timing), regardless of the amount of diegetic time that appears to pass in the strip. The link between information quantity and reading rate is one of the central concepts of comedic timing in comic strips.

An example of how information affects comics timing comes from a *Calvin and Hobbes* strip where Calvin's parents review photos of Calvin making funny faces (Watterson 146, ["Photos"], fig. 2.5). For purposes of analyzing the timing it will suffice to say that this joke's punchline (the final panel) works by contextualizing its setup (the previous thirteen panels), revealing that the images are photographs of Calvin. The punchline reveals what Calvin is doing in the setup, generating humour from the sudden realization of the context for the action (and from the silliness of the faces). Each of the setup panels has a quick timing: devoid of any background or foreground detail, each only establishes another of Calvin's funny faces. The timing of the strip as a whole is relatively quick as well, despite the fact that the quantity of panels implies that Calvin spends a large amount of diegetic time making himself look ridiculous. While my appreciation of this strip's timing may seem contradictory at first, it stems from the fact that this is a streamlined

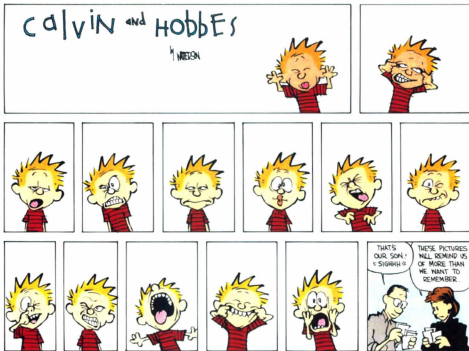


Fig. 2.5. Watterson 146, *Photos*.

and (relatively) simple joke. The quantity of ruined photos is an essential element of the eventual punchline; whether readers laugh at Calvin's audacious action or at his parents' resigned disappointment, the large scope of Calvin's mischief—the number of photos he ruined—makes the punch more forceful. Additionally, the lack of contextual information in the setup is essential as well: the punchline would not involve a sudden realization if readers knew from the start that the setup panels represent photographs. Though the setup has thirteen images, each image beyond the first conveys very little information, showing that Calvin makes yet another silly face. This lack of information makes the panels fast to read, giving them a quick timing. Granted, a high number of panels does slow down timing: readers have to at least glance at the thirteen images to notice that they are almost identical to each other. However, the repetition of similar panels speeds up the timing by encouraging readers to rapidly skim the setup and move on to the punchline, the visually distinct final panel. In order to build the comedy of the punchline, the setup must establish that

Calvin makes a lot of funny faces; thus, by encouraging readers to register and skim over the repetitive “face” panels, the setup quickly and effectively sets up the punchline. A series of simple, similar panels allows this strip to have a slow diegesis yet a quick timing, showing how information density affects timing in comic strips.

Comics comedians do not create strips with sparse details purely out of formula; rather, such an aesthetic affects the timing of the jokes. Comics theorists such as Pascal Lefèvre (158) and Scott McCloud (41–44) notice the frequent lack of visual complexity in comedy comics, though they do not engage with the notion of why simplistic illustrations frequently occur in humorous strips specifically. Lefèvre states that “not all comics rely on the same amount of visualized space: in funny comic strips... the backgrounds are quite minimal or even absent” (158). Lefèvre uses this observation as an example of the range of visual complexity in the comics medium, citing comic strips as counterpoints to more detailed graphic novels. However, for these funny comic strips, simplistic backgrounds can be essential elements of the humour, affecting the comedy as well as the aesthetic.<sup>8</sup>

Displaying large panels with minimal backgrounds, the *Peanuts* strip from December 26, 1971 (Schulz Plate 57, [“Snowing”], fig. 2.6) is a strong example of using sparse detail for comedy pacing. This strip is light on visual detail. The first two panels have very limited backgrounds—only two trees in each—and the remaining images have no background details at all. In fact, aside from a few props to indicate location, “Snowing” only contains the characters, foreground snow, and a few small speech balloons, most of which only contain “Z,” onomatopoeia that indicates snoring. Featuring ten panels and limited visual detail, “Snowing” is a quick read. Diegetically, however, this strip shows only two scenes—outside and inside—with few differences between most of the panels. McCloud and Harvey would likely claim that the repetition of similar frames creates a feeling of greater length in these scenes, showing that Linus lingers outside by the snoring snow,

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<sup>8</sup> Though I am arguing for the comical impact of simple backgrounds in comic strips, such backgrounds do affect the aesthetic of the strips. For example, many newspapers resize comic strips before publishing them (Watterson 14–16), and simple backgrounds help comic strips remain legible at smaller sizes.

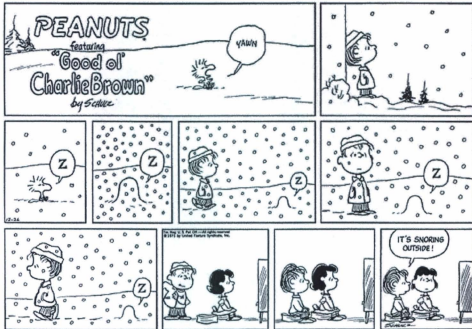


Fig. 2.6. Schulz Plate 57, *Snowing*.

and takes his time inside before stating his revelation. Though it may seem to disagree with my assessment of the timing of this strip, I agree that this repetition indicates that Linus moves slowly through both of these scenes, because Linus's unhurried movement is an important element of the joke. A pun such as this one is a relatively nonsensical twist of speech; it "derives most of its unique humor from *ambiguity* of [linguistic] form" (Davis 36, author's emphasis), the arbitrary relation between sound and meaning. The punchline of "Snowing," Linus's statement that "it's snoring outside," shows a remarkably appropriate absurdity that is close to the unremarkably appropriate phrase "it's snowing outside." Schulz adds humour to the strip by conveying the idea that Linus delivers his line without fanfare or excitement. The fact that Linus takes his time to sit down before speaking hints toward a calm delivery. However important Linus's slow speed may be, I assert that the light detail of "Snowing" quickly and effectively communicates the idea that Linus takes his time. For example, the transitions between panels five, six and seven show differences only in the arrangement of the snowflakes, the position of Linus, and the perspective of the frames (panel six is





Fig. 2.7. Watterson 191, *Abduction*.

“zoomed” slightly closer to Linus and Woodstock, making them appear bigger). There is little else in these panels to read, only the stationary Woodstock still sleeping under a pile of snow. Despite their effect on the diegetic time, these panels’ relatively large sizes and sparse detail give this strip a low density of information, and thus a quick timing.

If a comic strip with a few simple panels has a quick comedic timing, it follows that a strip with many intricate panels would have a much slower pace. A text-heavy strip has a low speed, since each word is a tidbit of information that the reader must see and comprehend. However, even in the absence of words, a comedy comic can have a leisurely tempo. Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes* features a text-less strip where Calvin gets abducted by aliens (191, [“Abduction”], fig. 2.7). Displaying one of Watterson’s famously complex layouts, “Abduction” first establishes that an alien-made Calvin replica committed various household crimes, and then in three separate panels—a visual indication of a change in the diegesis—Calvin’s mother drags him up to his room, seemingly unimpressed by Calvin’s imaginative excuse for his mischief. The yellow frame at the

bottom reveals that the rest of the strip is a frame narrative, showing a non-robotic Calvin speaking to his visibly agitated mother. The punchline—Calvin looking disgustingly out of an upstairs window—shows that Calvin's fanciful story did not allow him to escape punishment. This transition between narratives has a slow pace in and of itself, since in the absence of text the readers must piece the frame change together from visual clues such as Calvin's protesting pose and the sudden lack of robotic bolts. Visual detail as well as narrative complexity makes this an unhurried comic, including numerous small panels (such as one through four) and several detail-dense large panels (such as five and six). This strip's deliberate pace and meticulous detail add to the delivery of the joke, allowing the readers to experience the overwrought intricacy that Calvin brings to his fanciful tale. Watterson's joke in this strip relies on the humorous over-complexity of Calvin's excuse. Therefore, Watterson takes the trouble—and the time—to evoke a humorously complex story in his reader's imagination, complete with intricate backgrounds and interesting panel shapes. This strip shows a punchline in panel thirteen as Calvin appears genuinely disgusted that his Oscar-worthy performance does not prevent him from being grounded. The joke relies on Calvin putting incredible effort into his lie, and the dense detail and slow pacing of this strip allow the readers to appreciate the comedy of a childish excuse that is literally drawn out.

In general, complex panels convey high quantities of information and simple panels convey lower quantities, but this is not necessarily the case. A strip such as "Abduction" features panels that are visually and conceptually dense: they establish the many nuances of Calvin's tale, and thus establish that Calvin's tale is overwrought. Comparatively, a strip such as "Photos" features panels that are visually and conceptually simple: the thirteen "face" panels only establish that Calvin makes many funny faces. Mistimed jokes can challenge the conventions of comics timing by presenting panels that defy the general correlation between visual and conceptual density. For example, by displaying visually dense panels that provide very little information, comics comedians can defy reader expectation about the panels. This form of comedy is rare, as disjunctions between visual and conceptual density may appear to indicate poorly crafted comics rather than complex

comics jokes. However, mistimed jokes can nonetheless defy the general conventions of information density in comics, perhaps creating intentionally—and ironically—terrible comics.

An example of a mistimed joke that manipulates the quantity of information comes from Art Spiegelman's *Breakdowns*. Though *Breakdowns* is an anthology of short comics rather than a comic strip, the section "Cracking Jokes" (38-41) details some techniques of comics comedy. This section shows numerous versions of a comics joke, featuring distinct formal differences between each iteration. These formal differences do not all deal with the comics form *per se*. For example, one alteration switches the roles of the two characters but maintains the same panel count and layout (39), altering the comedy form but maintaining a very similar comics form. However, one permutation (40-41) drastically changes the comics form, turning the joke into a comical demonstration of comics timing. The original joke is largely incidental, but since my analysis will focus on one of Spiegelman's formal alterations (rather than the full "Cracking Jokes" section), I must establish the original joke before I can show how altering the quantity of information turns it into a mistimed joke. In the original joke, a man who believes that he is dead goes to see a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist instructs him to repeat the phrase "dead men don't bleed" for three hours (38). After three hours, the psychiatrist pricks the man's finger and draws blood, causing the deluded man to exclaim, "Dead men do bleed!" (38). The setup establishes three important diegetic points: the man thinks that he is dead; the psychiatrist instructs him to repeat "dead men don't bleed" for three hours; and "three hours later" (38) the psychiatrist pricks the man's finger, drawing blood. The punchline shows that the deluded man defies the psychiatrist's efforts, drawing a comical conclusion from the events of the setup. For my analysis, it is essential to note that this joke relies on the distinction between diegetic time and timing: the line "three hours later" quickly establishes a lengthy passage of diegetic time. However, one of Spiegelman's permutations removes this line, opting to illustrate these three repetitive hours with twenty-one repetitive panels. This formal alteration results in a mistimed joke that manipulates the density of information for the purpose of comedy.

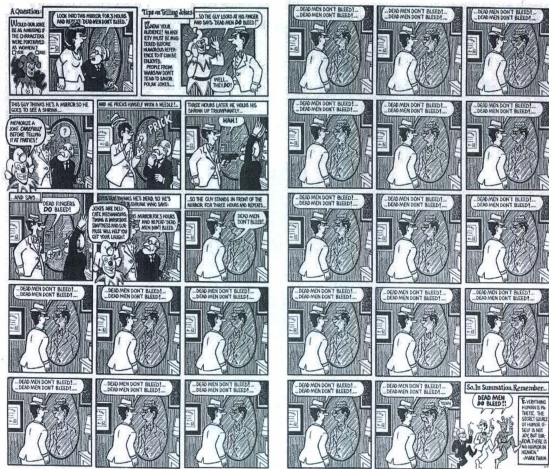


Fig. 2.8. Spiegelman 40-41, "Cracking Jokes"



Fig. 2.8a. Panel numbers for fig. 2.8.

At the beginning of this permutation (fig. 2.8), Spiegelman's narrator says that "timing is important" (40), and the joke that follows is a humorous display of intentionally terrible comics timing. The following twenty-one panels illustrate the "three hours later" line from the original joke (38), culminating in a punchline that admits to the joke's failed timing.<sup>9</sup> Panel two features a narrative caption that states, "the guy stands in front of the mirror for three hours and repeats..." (40), establishing the upcoming passage of diegetic time. The next nineteen panels—three through twenty-one—provide detailed illustrations of this simple line in panel two. These panels are almost as visually dense as those of the original joke: they retain background details such as certificates, a shadow, and a lamp. Similar to the "Photos" strip from earlier, readers may skim these panels after noticing that they are repetitive, thereby speeding up the pacing. However, eventual difference in the punchline is not striking enough to encourage readers to jump to it; therefore, despite the repetition, this strip does not have a quick timing. In *Reading Images*, Gunther Kress and Leo van Leeuwen state that, "The elements [of an image]... are made to attract the viewer's attention to different degrees, as realized by such factors as placement in the foreground or background, relative size, contrasts in tonal value (or colour), differences in sharpness, etc." (183), defining this visual property as "salience." The punchline of this permutation is not particularly salient compared to the repetitive setup, and thus it does not encourage readers to quickly skip to it. The repetitive panels also feature a paucity of information. Whereas the original joke in "Cracking Jokes" offers four panels that establish four diegetic points (three in the setup and one in the punchline), this permutation offers nineteen panels that establish only one diegetic point: three hours of repetition is boring. Even this "point" is not new information; the boring repetition of panels simply highlights the boring repetition of "dead men don't bleed" that panel two establishes. These panels severely reduce the density of information in the strip: whereas the original (effectively) had one point per panel, this version takes nineteen panels to elaborate on a point that one panel establishes. Interestingly however, these repetitive images add new extra-diegetic information: the presence of

9 For simplicity, I will refer to the panel that says "timing is important" as panel one, the panel with the "yawn" punchline as panel twenty-two, and the intervening panels as two through twenty-one.

nineteen boring—and apparently pointless—panels. The punchline—panel twenty-two—shows the character's reflection frowning and thinking "yawn," pointing out the repetitive nature of the previous panels. This punchline does not merely refer to the character's diegetic boredom at his task; it also refers to the strip's lack of "swiftness and surprise" (40), elements that, as Spiegelman says, "will help you get your laugh" (40). Thus, the low density of information is a key element of the setup: the final panel refers back to the first, comically pointing out that this joke has terrible timing. This portion of "Cracking Jokes" is a mistimed joke that comically acknowledges its own comical failure.

Though comics comedians cannot directly determine how long it will take readers to read their jokes, they can control the timing of their strips by manipulating the amount of information in the panels. A prose writer knows it takes longer for someone to read 2000 words than 1000, and a comics artist knows that some pictures are worth more words than others. The more information that a joke has to set up, the longer the joke and the slower the timing. Likewise, the timing of comics jokes is inherently tied to their visual complexity and the amount of information that the strip conveys. Comics comedians can defy this correlation between visual and conceptual density, but it results in intentionally poor strips and exceptionally difficult jokes.

## **Section 2.4: Conclusion**

Joke timing in comics is a logical starting point for this paper not because it is simple, but because it is an inescapable element of comic strip jokes. All comic strips have arrangements and quantities of information, and these arrangements and quantities necessarily affect the timing of their jokes. Comics jokes require both setups and punchlines, and the arrangements of information influence when readers realize both these elements and thus "get" the joke. Detail-heavy panels take longer to read than detail-light panels, and therefore the density of information affects comics joke timing as well. Very few strips collapse expectations about timing, but such challenges to the visual tools of comics time are possible, as "Borrow" and "Cracking Jokes" show. This chapter approaches

comics comedy from the ground up; many of my subsequent analyses will incorporate my conclusions about comics joke timing. Timing is foundational to humour, and therefore it is foundational to my study of humour as well.

## Chapter 3: Unseen Sights

### Section 3.1: Introduction

At a basic level, comic books tell stories through series of pictures, and comic strips tell jokes the same way. Since comics is a visual medium, understanding images is one of the foremost elements of comics literacy. Narration through static images<sup>10</sup> is a key component of the comics form. Though it may seem obvious to seasoned comics readers, comics literacy depends on the knowledge that comics images are limited perspectives on diegetic worlds. Panel boundaries do not (necessarily) correspond to fictional boundaries, and still images do not (necessarily) imply still diegeses. Like photographs or representational paintings, comics images represent sections of worlds that they render static. These worlds consist of far more than the frozen frames can show, continuing before, after, and around the still-life images. Comics literacy involves understanding that the diegetic world in the comics panel is not the world in its entirety. In order to “see” full diegeses, readers must complete the diegetic world in their imagination, interpreting the image supplied synecdochically and picturing the unseen elements, which I am calling “unseen sights.” These unseen sights may exist within panels (behind speech balloons or other objects), outside panels (beyond the limits of what appears in the panel), or between panels (movements that link images together). Comics theorists often refer to this process of imagining visuals as achieving “closure” (McCloud 63, Hatfield 135, among others). Achieving closure is a key element of comics literacy; therefore, manipulating closure is a key element of comics comedy. Since comics relies heavily on sights that are absent but implied, comics comedians can twist these implications to create jokes that rely on the formal structure of comics.

Achieving closure is a necessary component of understanding comics, and thus understanding closure is a necessary component of understanding how comics comedians complicate the process of understanding comics. McCloud shows that closure can be as straightforward as realizing that a character’s legs are still diegetically present even if a panel ends

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<sup>10</sup> “Static” as opposed to the illusion of movement that comes from the rapid succession of images in film.



at the character's waist (61). In other words, comics readers achieve closure when they realize that the visuals in the panels metonymically represent larger images. The notion of metonymy as a key part of reading is not original to comics theory: metonymy is equally important in other visual forms such as film, representational painting and photography. For instance, film theorist James Monaco claims that "metonymical devices yield themselves so well to cinematic exploitation . . . Associated details can be compressed within the limits of the frame to present a statement of extraordinary richness. Metonymy is a kind of cinematic shorthand" (135-36), and it is a kind of comics shorthand as well. Closure is not unique to comics, but it is important to comics. Even in his early discussion of closure, McCloud shows that implied sights are ripe for humorous exploitation. "In this panel you can't even see my legs," McCloud's narrator states, "yet you assume that they're there. . . . Even though they're not!" (61). This passage humorously points out the disjunction between unseen sights—the character's legs—and literal sights—blank space below the panel border.<sup>11</sup> In "The Construction of Space in Comics," Pascal Lefèvre states that "the reader constructs the diegetic space in various ways: both by elements that appear inside the frame and by elements that remain unseen (in the French called *hors champ*)" (157).<sup>12</sup> Building on the image provided within the panel, the reader infers a larger diegetic space, incorporating both seen and unseen elements. These unseen elements are necessarily implied by the seen ones; the contextual in-panel clues lead readers to make assumptions about the unseen diegetic sights. Visual theorist John Berger addresses unseen sights in photography by saying that "every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights" (10); in comics, these other possible sights are *hors champ* elements. The images

11 At this point in the thesis, it is not necessary to understand the formal mechanics of this joke; it is more important as a demonstration of closure than as a joke *per se*. This joke relies on more than just implying unseen elements; it also refers to the literal appearance of the strip (the lack of printed legs on the page) in a comedy technique sometimes known as "breaking the fourth wall." Though I will not detail it here, pointing out the disjunction between diegesis and reality is a powerful form of comedy, and it is the topic of Chapter Five of this thesis.

12 Lefèvre uses the term "*hors champ*" as a category that "not only refer[s] to the virtual supposed space outside the frame (in French called *hors cadre*) of a certain panel, but also to the supposed "hidden" space within the borders of the panel itself (in French called *hors champ interne*)" (157-158). I will borrow Lefèvre's use of "*hors champ*," as a category referring to unseen elements outside the panel borders and elements obscured by foreground images within panels.

within comics panels are diegetically larger than they appear, implying the presence of unseen sights that exist off-panel.

Closure involves more than just diegetic sights that are spatially off-panel; it also involves sights that are temporally off-panel, occurring before, after, or between images. These sights change over time; they can occur in the same diegetic space as the on-panel elements, but the panels are static and cannot change. However, these panels can imply change over time, using techniques such as “before” and “after” shots (McCloud 70-71) and motion blur (McCloud 111-14) that hint toward the intervening events. Based on these clues, readers achieve closure by imagining the off-panel sights. In other words, closure involves motion, which is change in position over time (relative to a frame of reference). Scott McCloud’s concept of “closure” includes motion as well as off-panel elements, and he states that “the reader’s deliberate, voluntary closure is comics’ primary means of simulating time and motion” (69). McCloud expands closure to include translating series of still-life pictures—what readers see—into diegetic worlds with time and motion—what readers imagine after achieving closure.<sup>13</sup> Building upon McCloud’s theory of closure, Chris Hatfield claims that a comics “reader’s task is to translate the given series [of images] into a narrative sequence by achieving closure” (135), a process that “requires the invocation of learned competencies; the relationships between pictures are a matter of convention, not inherent connectedness” (135). Hatfield mentions a key concept for actions in comics: readers must use their “learned competencies” to establish connections between panels. Such competencies can come from real-life experiences or from understanding the visual tools of comics. Even if a reader realizes that one comics image diegetically leads into the next, s/he still has to divine the relationship between them based on clues. This perceived relationship between comics panels is similar to the illusion of motion in cinema, since film is a rapid succession of still images. Film theorist Bruce F. Kavin states that when watching a movie, “the eyes see one distinct frame after another—successive glimpses, for example, of a hand in the act of waving. The brain applies the real-world laws of

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13 As in Chapter Two, here I am largely unconcerned with closure affecting diegetic time. For this chapter, diegetic time is only important insofar as it allows readers to imagine motion.

cause and effect to this series of stills and deduces that the hand *must have moved* from one photographed position to another—and so we imagine that we have actually seen the object move” (48, author’s emphasis). Film encourages the audience to subconsciously achieve closure, whereas comics encourages the audience to consciously achieve closure. Though actions do not link all comics panels, every action in comics is temporally off-panel, forcing readers to imagine the changes in position over time. Readers see visual clues that exist before and/or after implied movements, then invoke learned competencies to imagine the unseen motions that transpire in the diegetic worlds.

Whereas achieving closure is a component of the comics reading process, manipulating closure is a component of formalist comics comedy. Closure plays a fundamental structural role in comics, allowing strips to incorporate unseen sights that continue before, after, within, and around the limited, still panels. However, these unseen sights are not rigidly defined; rather, readers must interpret these visuals based on in-panel clues. By using these clues to imply the presence of off-panel elements (such as a character’s legs existing below the panel border), comics comedians can set up unexpected punchlines that defy the previous implications (such as stating that the legs are not present in reality, despite what the diegetic closure may imply). Formalist comics comedy can intentionally force readers to achieve closure that proves to be comically incorrect, collapsing this reading process and complicating the audience’s ideas about the off-panel visuals. Comic strips require readers to achieve closure for straightforward, narrative purposes as well, but I will focus on instances where the jokes use misleading in-panel clues to lead readers to achieve false closure. These closure-based jokes break down into two basic categories: those based on implied elements outside the panels (*hors champ*) and those based on the unseen events that link panels together (actions). As varied as these jokes may be, they all manipulate closure. Narration through static images is a core component of the comics form, and collapsing this narration is a core component of formalist comics comedy; therefore, analyzing such a comical collapse must be a core component of comics comedy criticism.

### Section 3.2: *Hors Champ* Elements and Off-Panel Jokes

The definition of *hors champ* sounds like a joke; it is a category of elements that both exist and do not exist, a potentially humorous contradiction that makes *hors champ* elements into important tools for comics comedy. *Hors champ* elements can include off-panel sounds<sup>14</sup> as well as sights, but for my purposes I will focus strictly on visual *hors champ* elements. These unseen sights are important components of comics narratives, equally as important as the in-panel images. James Monaco speaks to the importance of off-screen elements in film, stating that much of the meaning in cinema “comes not from what we see (or hear) but from what we don’t see or, more accurately, from an ongoing process of comparison of what we see with what we don’t see” (136). Comics employs a similar process of comparison: the elements that we see allow us to imagine the elements that we do not see. Diegetically, *hors champ* elements are largely the same as in-panel visual elements. Since panel borders are (usually) unrelated to the diegesis, characters can sometimes “see” elements that readers cannot; there is no such thing as “off-panel” within the fictional world. From the perspective of readers, however, *hors champ* elements are far different from their visible counterparts. Though these sights may be important—or even integral—to the diegesis, readers do not see them. *Hors champ* elements exist for the characters but are implied for the readers, a potentially funny disconnect between reader and text. However, *hors champ* elements have some connection with the in-panel visible field: clues that hint toward where and what they are. Comics comedians can amplify the humour of the disconnection between reader and text by providing conflicting or confusing clues about unseen sights in the setups of their jokes. The punchlines can then twist the setups, humorously collapsing the implied *hors champ* elements and replacing them with something else. Jokes based on *hors champ* elements—or “off-panel jokes” for short—complicate the audience’s ability to imagine the unseen sights of comics.

In-panel clues can often allow comics readers to imagine off-panel diegetic elements, but in

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<sup>14</sup> Diegetic sounds with no corresponding symbols of comics sound in the panels. This category does not include in-panel sounds whose origins are off-panel, such as speech balloons with “tails” pointing to off-panel speakers. In these cases the speakers are *hors champ* elements but the sounds are not.

off-panel jokes, these clues also serve to set up the punchlines. A comics comedian can complicate the process of completing the diegesis by implying a certain off-panel element in the setup, and then abruptly altering the implication in the punchline. Murray S. Davis states that “since the unexpected is an essential feature of humor, comics continually try to undercut their audience’s expectations” (12), and suddenly undermining expectations about *hors champ* elements can lead to strong jokes. This quote echoes Max Eastman’s notion of comedic reversal in *The Sense of Humor*. Eastman states that jokes can encourage one expectation in the setup, and then present the “square and overwhelming” (35) opposite of that expectation in the punchline. Structurally, jokes based on *hors champ* elements function identically to the jokes that Eastman mentions, presenting two conflicting perspectives on the diegetic space. Off-panel jokes encourage the audience’s expectation in the setup, then undercut this cultivated expectation in the punchline, creating jokes by revealing the audience’s inferences about the off-panel elements to be incorrect or inappropriate.

A straightforward form of off-panel joke offers conflicting implications about the off-panel elements. The implications in the setups may appear appropriate and logical, and thus the eventual twists in the punchlines may be unexpected. The *Peanuts* strip from October 9, 1966 (Schulz Plate 23, [“Car”], fig. 3.1) humorously twists such an implication about an *hors champ* element. The joke is a collision of opposites that relies on contrasting Linus’s interpretation against the father’s characterization of the unseen action. Looking off-panel, Lucy and Linus see their father “backing the car out of the garage,” and assume that he is going to the store. They then inundate him with demands, beginning with a (relatively) reasonable request for a comic and a candy bar, and building momentum until their list includes a football and a boat. This rising intensity makes for tidbits of humour over the course of the strip, as Linus’s childish greed metastasizes in panels five through nine. However, at the end Linus falls flat in his comical opportunism when he realizes that his father is not going to the store at all. His selfish momentum begins with an unwarranted assumption, and it crashes with the refutation of that assumption. This joke form echoes one of Eastman’s comedy laws, stating that “the identity of the positive current with the negative must be immediate and



Fig. 3.1. Schulz Plate 23, *Car*.

perfect" (99).<sup>15</sup> In other words, in this style of joke the punchline must suddenly show an implied interpretation of the diegesis to be incorrect by substituting a contradictory interpretation in its place. The comedy comes from replacing one interpretation of the diegesis with another one that is opposite yet appropriate (and, for the sake of the humour, hopefully unexpected). The joke in "Car" follows this style: it is a collision of opposites in the form of false assumption and fact.

The joke in "Car" revolves around *hors champ* elements—the off-panel father with the car—rather than Linus and Lucy's humorously growing demands. The punchline of the strip does not come with the frustration of Linus's greed in Panel Ten, but with the illumination of the dad's action in the final panel. The real meat of this joke is not the deflation of Linus's hopes *per se*; if it were, the punchline would be his deflated "oh" in Panel Ten. Rather, the joke culminates with why Linus's hopes are deflated. The comedy in the strip comes from Linus's erroneous interpretation of his dad's unseen actions. The force of the punchline comes from its abrupt refutation of Linus's

15 Eastman borrows from the mathematical definitions of "perfect" (meaning complete), "identity" (meaning two functions that are equal), and "positive" and "negative" (meaning opposites), and from his own definition of "current of feeling" (96-97, meaning an interpretation, or what a listener feels about a joke).

assumption. Like a reader building a diegetic world to include *hors champ* elements, Linus makes an assumption based on clues. Importantly, readers never see Linus's dad in action: their only information is Linus's description of the action. Readers interpret the off-panel elements along with Linus, and even if they laugh at the children's greed, the assumption that the dad is going to the store is the best clue the readers have about this unseen sight. Based on Linus's perspective, readers (probably) construct mental images of the dad going to the store. The punchline shows this interpretation of the off-panel elements to be false, collapsing the mental images in a way readers do not anticipate. This refutation of expectation is a tried-and-true comedy technique: the artist implies one expanded diegetic world through a subjective frame, then suddenly collapses that frame for the sake of comedy.

The implied diegetic worlds of off-panel jokes are not necessarily as logical or appropriate as the fictional world in "Car," however. If "Car" does not show Linus's father or his car, it is nonetheless easy to imagine a man backing an automobile out of a garage. More complex off-panel jokes can involve unseen sights that are not so easy to understand, including clues that imply improbable *hors champ* elements. The punchlines of these strips can then explain or dispel the confusing improbability, collapsing the initial subjective frame and causing the audience to laugh. An example of such a strip comes from the Peanuts strip from August 14, 1960 (Schulz Plate 14, ["Clouds"], fig. 3.2). The strip features Charlie Brown, Linus, and Lucy lying on a grassy hilltop and discussing the clouds that they see. Simple clouds are prominent aspects of the first panel (otherwise known as the "title panel"), implying that such clouds are important elements of the strip. Despite the fact that clouds are on-panel elements of this panel, they are still unseen sights for the purposes of the joke. Clouds constantly move, and therefore the title panel does not necessarily display the clouds that the children discuss. Furthermore, due to the publishing constraints mentioned earlier, the title panel is not necessarily present in every printing of the strip, and therefore this "establishing shot" cannot be an integral component of the joke. Beyond the title panel the clouds never appear; readers must imagine the clouds based on the descriptions that the

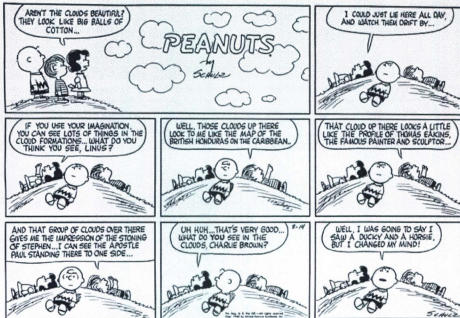


Fig. 3.2. Schulz Plate 14, *Clouds*.

characters give. The clouds exist beyond the borders of the panels, but due to the title panel and the character's discussions, the readers' construction of the diegetic space of the strip necessarily includes the clouds.

The joke in "Clouds" features a clash of two opposite perspectives on the *hors champ* elements. The humour does not depend on the reader preferring Linus's pretentious interpretation of the clouds or Charlie Brown's humble one—to spark the comedy, it is enough that one perspective opposes the other. The joke relies on the contrast. At first Linus's description seems plausible if unlikely—a cloud certainly could look like the map of a specific island. Linus's interpretations of the clouds decrease in plausibility as they go on, building momentum that crashes into Charlie Brown's modest sighting of a "ducky and a horseie." The gradual progression makes Linus's creativity or pretension sharply conflict with Charlie Brown's simplicity. Additionally, Linus uses grave and serious comparisons such as "the stoning of Stephen," whereas Charlie Brown uses infantile versions of the words "duck" and "horse," further building the contrast between the



characters' interpretations. The structural "punch" of the strip is Linus's complex perspective abruptly running into Charlie Brown's banal perspective, using a collision of opposites to suddenly complicate the implied image of the off-panel clouds.

Schulz omits the clouds not because of a spatial constraint but because the omission supplies him with an additional tool for building first the comedic momentum and then the humorous inversion. The key concept for these *hors champ* elements is that readers only "see" them through the perspectives of the characters and the descriptions they provide. Readers can only infer off-panel sights based on in-panel clues, and in "Clouds" Schulz uses this fundamental fact of comics representation to create comedy. In panel three Lucy prompts Linus and Charlie Brown to "use your imagination" to "see lots of things in the cloud formations," and readers go further, imagining the clouds themselves. Linus spots "the map of British Honduras on the Caribbean," "the profile of Thomas Eakins," and "the stoning of Stephen," and these are the only in-panel clues that readers have. Where readers cannot recall the iconic visage of Thomas Eakins, their imaginary clouds will be rough jumbles, with Linus's statements making readers progressively more perplexed. Even if a reader has the varied knowledge to identify these shapes, Linus's evaluations will make for improbably complex cloud scenes. The audience creates the clouds as they read, filling in vague details based on Linus's confusing descriptions. The final panel reveals that the clouds' complexity is in the eye of the beholder; Charlie Brown's description is not complex at all. Representing the clouds in-panel would ruin this joke, as would having a character (such as Lucy) arbitrate between Linus and Charlie Brown. The comedy of "Clouds" comes from Charlie Brown and Linus's contrasting, subjective viewpoints, not from determining which of the two is more "correct." The joke in "Clouds" humorously shows that characters can be unreliable sources of diegesis-building information.

Despite the relative simplicity of the off-panel elements in "Car" and "Clouds," unseen sights in comic strips are not limited to physical objects that exist beyond the panel borders; rather, they can include any aspects of the diegetic worlds that are not visually present in the panels. *Hors*

*champ* elements in comics are directly related to frame and perspective: anything that exists outside of a comics frame (a panel) is an *hors champ* element by definition.<sup>16</sup> The selection of a visual perspective on the diegetic world—otherwise known as “framing”—is a process that leaves certain diegetic elements off-panel. Artists select which aspects of the narrative world to show visually and then imply the rest. After discussing the use of unseen sights in comics, Pascal Lefèvre claims that “the artist has thus a powerful tool, namely framing, at his hands: by limiting the scope for the viewer and therefore the available information, the artist can cause a reader to make wrong inferences” (158). Lefèvre does not mention comedy in his article, but the idea of “wrong inferences” applies particularly strongly to comic strip jokes. Though these incorrect interpretations can come from unseen elements that are off panel—such as the actions of Linus’s dad in “Car”—more complex examples of faulty assumptions come from strips that present their diegetic worlds in perspectives—or frames—that eventually prove incorrect. This style of comics joke can “collapse an... expectation system” by building one “subjective frame” and then revealing that it is incongruous with the “real” diegetic world. Instead of playing on characters’ interpretations of *hors champ* elements (like “Clouds” and “Car”), these strips present seen elements that prove misleading. Readers do not have to imagine these elements, and that is part of the point. Though they may seem unbelievable or out of place, these seen elements are there, forcing readers to imagine why they are present. The punchline then changes the framing, dispelling the confusion surrounding the original perspective and (hopefully) causing the readers to laugh. This framing does not diegetically exist off-panel, but it is nonetheless an off-panel element: the context for the in-panel elements.

In Calvin’s frequent imaginary escapades, Bill Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes* often builds one perspective and then switches to another. Even if readers are familiar with *Calvin and Hobbes* and identify the digressions into fantasy as the products of the main character’s imagination, the specific real-world inspirations for these dreams still offer unexpected incongruities. One such

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<sup>16</sup> That is, by Lefèvre’s definition, as quoted in Section 3.1.

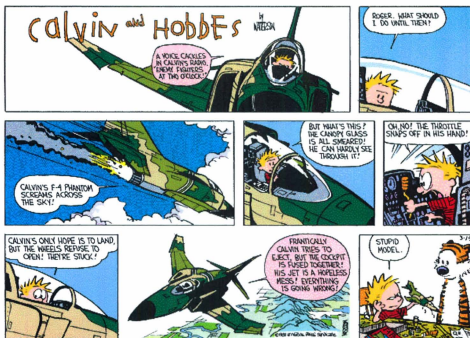


Fig. 3.3. Watterson 77, *Jet*.

fantasy strip features Calvin flying a fighter jet (Watterson 77, [*“Jet”*], fig. 3.3). In panel four the setup builds as Calvin mentions mysterious occurrences, listing catastrophic structural problems such as the throttle snapping off (panel five) and the cockpit being “fused together” (panel seven). Calvin exclaims that “everything is going wrong” (panel seven) in his fighter jet, and this certainly seems to be the case; the real question is why. “*Jet*” begins with a perspective that cannot possibly be true—a child piloting a fighter jet—and gets only more fantastic as the strip continues, leaving the audience to wait for the expected twist, or in comedy lingo, for “the other shoe to drop.” This shoe drops in the final panel where Calvin holds a “stupid model” airplane dripping with glue: his seemingly inexplicable fantasy derives from his real-world frustration with the toy fighter. This revelation suddenly illuminates the meaning behind the fantasy of the broken jet, collapsing the impossible perspective and replacing it with comedic understanding.

Though “*Jet*” does not rely on metonymic visuals, it is nonetheless an off-panel joke that is structurally similar to the previous two examples. Akin to readers forming expectations about *hors*

*champ* elements based on in-panel clues, readers form expectations about the strip's "reality" based on the fantasy of the fighter jet.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the punchline does not only collapse an impossible perspective; it also confirms or denies reader expectations about the context for Calvin's fantasy. Murray S. Davis says that the comedy of such a joke "depends on the correlation between our subjective 'expectation system' and the objective 'real system'" (13), or in other words, on the accuracy of the audience's predictions: such jokes are funny when they show reader expectations to be inaccurate. To understand this "correlation" it is useful to recall Davis's passage on humorous incongruities, where he says that "by replacing only one congruous element with an incongruous element, humor can disintegrate an expectation system" (13). The notion of replacing "only one" element is key: these jokes are funniest when the "real" system disintegrates the expectation system by altering as few diegetic elements as possible. Though readers may easily predict that Calvin piloting the jet is a flight of fancy, it is less easy to account for all the clues in the setup, such as the slew of mechanical difficulties. The punchline of "Jet" accounts for all the clues by revealing the "real" context: Calvin is building a model jet. The humour does not come from the punchline confirming the reader's suspicion that the jet is not real; rather, it comes from presenting an unanticipated context that accounts for the text of the setup. In the punchline the framing of reality replaces the framing of fantasy, creating comedy that relies not on the literal limits of the images—the borders—but their narrative limitations—their lack of illuminating context. "Jet" makes a joke out of explaining the context for Calvin's fantasy, and context is the ultimate off-panel element.

While the fact that *hors champ* elements both exist and do not exist may make them sound like jokes, this same fact allows them to be the foci of a unique form of comic strip jokes. These strips play with closure by intentionally implying an incorrect or inappropriate diegesis in the setup, then suddenly twisting this implication in the punchline. *Hors champ* elements are key components of the unique narrative structure of comics, and they are key components of the unique comedy structure of comics as well. Achieving closure is essential for understanding the comics form, and

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17 Even if readers do not realize that the fighter jet is Calvin's fantasy, they still form expectations about the strip: in this case, they expect that the jet is real.

thus undermining closure is a prominent aspect of comedy based on the comics form.

### Section 3.3: Actions

No matter how evocative or lively a still image may appear, a static panel cannot display motion. Motion is change in position over time, and since comics cannot directly recreate the passage of time, it also cannot directly recreate motion. However, comics can imply the passage of time in several ways. Comics can use sequences of images or visual techniques in individual panels to indicate temporal progression. Since motion can only exist in time, techniques that indicate temporal progression are also necessary to indicate movement. Actions do not exist inside panels; rather, they exist in the extended diegetic spaces that readers must imagine. Like *hors champ* elements, actions rely on in-panel clues to imply their existence. These clues form the contexts of the actions, showing glimpses of the diegetic worlds before, after, and during<sup>18</sup> the implied motions. Since comics cannot display motion, comics actions are implied by their contexts. Though it is necessary for the comics form, contextually implied action leads to an interesting conundrum for comics comedy. Contextual implications—and reader expectations about these implications—define comics actions, and thus it appears that comics actions cannot collapse these expectation systems. In other words, since comics motions are implied by their contexts, action-based jokes in comics may appear to be impossible, or at least severely restricted. However, action-based jokes do exist in comics, incorporating motions that humorously contradict themselves: they are both appropriate and inappropriate for their contexts. Thus, action-based jokes represent significant formalist challenges to the comics interpretive process, comically defying the contextual relations

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18 Some comics artists—particularly those working in superhero comics—use “motion lines” (McCloud 111) to indicate actions that are in progress. For example, a trail of lines may follow Batman’s fist, indicating the trajectory of his punch. Whatever stylistic interest these lines hold, they serve primarily to add information about an action. Even actions with “motion lines” still require reader interpretation, and thus I will not analyze motion lines specifically in this thesis. Motion lines are simply some of the most effective clues for implying actions, and my focus is on the comedy of actions, not on the clues that imply them *per se*. Furthermore, though I list “during” as a separate entity from “before” and “after,” it is a false distinction that is only separate at a glance. An image “during” an action is simultaneously both “before” and “after” (after the previous part of the action and before the subsequent part). A “during” image effectively breaks one diegetic movement into two smaller actions that readers must imagine, and therefore it is both “before” and “after.”

that define them.

Actions in comics are structurally similar to *hors champ* elements, as both exist off-panel and require the achievement of closure; however, actions in comics are far more common than *hors champ* elements. *Hors champ* elements are spatially off-panel, existing beyond the limits of the fields of vision; actions are temporally off-panel, existing before and after the still images. Whereas comics narratives sometimes feature important aspects beyond the panel borders, they (almost) always involve time and motion. Structurally, *hors champ* elements are tools that comics artists can use, while movements are integral components of (nearly) every comic strip. Therefore, in order to analyze action-based jokes in comics, I must differentiate them from jokes that simply involve motion. In comic strips—and in comedy as a whole—readers continually imagine characters to be in motion, but not every imagined movement is a focal point for humour. Action-based jokes have punchlines that directly spring from (imagined) comical actions. Such a punchline can take several forms, including: a clue that implies the action (or a culmination of several clues), an aftereffect of the action (sometimes also a form of clue), or even a character's commentary on an action. This definition of "action-based joke" raises another question: what defines a "comical action"? For a joke to be action-based, the action has to be the focus of the comedy. In other words, the punchline must indicate, augment, or otherwise spark the comedy of a humorous action, rather than making a joke about an otherwise unfunny action. Therefore, to understand action-based jokes, I must first appeal to comedy theory in order to understand what makes actions funny.

As many comedy theorists note, humour does not come from an action itself, but from the fact that an action does not fit its context. In other words, actions are funny when they defy expectations. Comedy theorist Murray S. Davis states that humour "takes its character from what it is not—that is, ordered, and therefore expected, experience" (14), and a funny action is one that is neither ordered nor expected. Comics actions cannot be completely unordered and unexpected, and thus action jokes in comics must incorporate more than just surprising motions. Contextually appropriate actions are not punchlines, and since motions in comics exist because of their contexts,

action-based jokes in comics may appear to be impossible. However, action-based jokes do exist in comics, and thus my analysis of action-based jokes in comics requires a deeper look into what makes actions funny. Davis also says that "the mental gestalt of the expectation system is usually delicate" (13), and "those whose expectation system gestalt becomes incomplete or partial may break up into laughter" (13). In other words, comedy involves surprising audience members by showing them that their expectations for a given situation are incorrect, or at least partially incorrect. Comedy often benefits from being unpredictable, and substituting an unexpected diegetic element for an anticipated one is an effective way to be unpredictable. Physical jokes come not from actions *per se*, but from the fact that these actions do not fit the expectation systems of their contexts. The events of successful jokes defy the audience's learned competencies, causing them to laugh. In comic strips, however, placing an incongruous action into an established expectation system is tricky. Comics establish both contexts and actions based on in-panel clues. Thus, the contextual clues of comic strips must do double duty, both establishing expectation systems and implying distinct events that are incongruous with those systems.

The "double duty" of contextual clues in action-based comics jokes is not as complicated as it may sound: it reflects the difference between setup and punchline. In the setups of action-based jokes, contextual clues forge expectation systems by establishing the contexts for the strips. These implications are necessarily subtle, involving the readers' learned competencies about what conduct is normal and expected for a given context. The contexts can be fictional and fanciful, but they must always involve some logical regulations. The setups of action-based jokes must use contextual clues to establish these expectation systems; since the punchlines will subvert these expectations, effective strips must establish them in the setups before moving on to the punchlines. The punchlines are not necessarily the clues that imply the out-of-context actions, but they always refer to the focal actions, pointing out that these actions are out of place in the contexts that the setups establish. Thus, though action-based jokes both establish and subvert contexts, these roles are largely split between the setups and the punchlines. The comedic timing of the strips—the

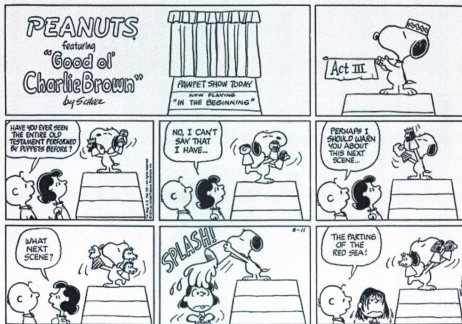


Fig. 3.4. Schulz Plate 122, *Puppets*.

separations of setups and punchlines—reflects the arrangements of visual elements, allowing visual clues first to define and then to defy the diegetic worlds of the strips.

A basic form of action-based joke in comics focuses on an out-of-place action that occurs in the diegetic time between two panels. However, even these jokes are not necessarily straightforward, because comics cannot directly recreate motion, and therefore comics actions cannot be precise enough to be punchlines. Thus, even simple action-based comics jokes rely on punchlines that refer to or otherwise indicate their focal actions. The *Peanuts* strip from August 11, 1975 (Schulz Plate 122, ["Puppets"], fig. 3.4) is such an action-based joke: its punchline is a character's response to a comical action. In this strip the character's reactions to the focal action are integral to the comedy, focusing the humour of the out-of-place action. "Puppets" features Charlie Brown and Lucy watching Snoopy act out "the entire Old Testament performed by puppets," with Lucy never having seen such a show before. Charlie Brown says in panel five that "perhaps I should warn you about this next scene," setting up expectation about what the next scene could be



and why it requires a warning. Panel seven shows Snoopy dumping a bucket of water on Lucy's head. This frame provides some physical comedy and dispels part of the reader's expectation, answering why Lucy might need a warning. However, this frame does not say what the scene is, nor does it say why a puppet show needs a splash zone. In the final panel Charlie Brown states that the scene is "the parting of the Red Sea," illuminating the events. However, though it contributes to the joke, this revelation<sup>19</sup> is not the entire force of the strip's punchline. Rather, the humour comes from Charlie Brown's dispassionate understanding in the face of sudden physical comedy. Seeing someone suddenly drenched with water is outside of the normal expectation system for a puppet show, making Snoopy's action comical. However, neither Charlie Brown nor Lucy laugh at this funny scene. As the butt of the joke, Lucy's lack of laughter is appropriate for the context. Not only does Charlie Brown not laugh, however; he also offers a calm explanation for what just happened. He is not happy that Lucy got soaked, nor is he mad, surprised or apologetic about his dog's conduct. He is unmoved, an example of comical inaction in the face of a comical action. Charlie Brown acts as if nothing is funny at all, a humorously unexpected disposition that challenges the learned idea that a surprise dousing is out of place. The comedic force of "Puppets" builds with Snoopy's unexpected action and peaks with Charlie Brown's surprising attitude toward that action; the action is the focus of the setup, but the attitude is the punchline. Charlie Brown's attitude toward the action is (most likely) incongruous with the audience's expectation system about how an onlooker would react in such a situation. Additionally, Charlie Brown appears to understand Snoopy's bizarre show, a circumstance that also almost certainly sets him at odds with the audience. To him, the bucket of water is just another part of the show. Not only does he remember the bucket from before, but he also can follow the puppet show well enough to know what part of the Old Testament is coming next. Charlie Brown's apparent understanding is a part of the setup, informing the reader that an unexpected twist is coming. Though Snoopy's out-of-place action is the twist that Charlie Brown indicates, it is Charlie Brown's attitude about said twist that refers to the action first

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<sup>19</sup> Or rather, this Exodus.



Fig. 3.5. Schulz Plate 20, Hot Chocolate.

in the setup, and second in the punchline. The joke in “Puppets” revolves around an out-of-place action, but it uses the perspective of a character to refer to the unseen, off-panel motion both in the setup and in the punchline.

Though all comics actions are off-panel, some actions are more off-panel than others. The action in “Puppets” is off-panel in a temporal sense; the humorous event occurs between two of the frames. However, action-based jokes can focus on motions that are spatially off-panel as well, as the *Peanuts* strip from August 6, 1967 (Schulz Plate 20, [“Hot Chocolate”], fig. 3.5) shows. “Hot Chocolate” features Linus walking off-panel to make hot chocolate for Lucy and himself. Linus spends six panels off-frame, causing Lucy to glance around and wonder what is taking him so long; this uneventful pacing offers a puzzling lack of clues about Linus’s off-panel actions. Linus’s explanation—that he barbecued the hot chocolate—is a perplexing punchline that is out of place for any serious attempt to make hot chocolate. The punchline disintegrates expectation systems in several ways, introducing incongruities such as how Linus could barbecue hot chocolate, what Linus means by “barbecue,” or what is actually in the cup. Though these incongruities (and more)

are possible based on the readers' interpretations, they all share a common root: barbecuing is incongruous with making hot chocolate. Additionally, the punchline incorporates character elements as well, implying perhaps that Linus is an inexperienced child with no idea how to make hot chocolate, or perhaps that he is being rude to his sister. However, though these comical implications involve Linus's character, they still focus on the humorous action for this strip, the mysterious act of barbecuing hot chocolate.<sup>20</sup> Like Charlie Brown's referral to Snoopy's out-of-place action in "Puppets," Linus's statement in "Hot Chocolate" mentions a humorous action, allowing an off-panel motion to be the focus of an in-panel joke.

Counter-intuitively, the fact that the action in "Hot Chocolate" is both temporally and spatially off-panel strengthens the punch of this action-based joke. Unlike Snoopy's dousing of Lucy in "Puppets," Linus's action in "Hot Chocolate" is completely unseen, in an off-panel diegetic space with no "before" and "after" images to illuminate the motion. "Hot Chocolate" features very few clues as to the nature of Linus's out-of-place action. In fact, aside from the initial request (to make hot chocolate), the large number of panels, and Lucy's puzzled question in panel eleven (both implying that Linus is gone for a long time), Linus's final statement is the only clue about what he actually does. This lack of information is a key component to this strip, allowing the punchline both to focus entirely on the action, and also to reveal the action all at once. The setup only establishes that Linus takes a long time to make hot chocolate. Thus, the timing of this strip is quick, despite the relatively high number of panels; similar to the "Photos" strip in Chapter One, "Hot Chocolate" has many simple images that do not add much new information (panels five to ten). The setup only needs to establish that Linus takes a long time to make hot chocolate, and it takes nine panels to do so (panels three to eleven). This paucity of information makes the sudden addition of incongruous information in the punchline even more forceful. Additionally, the punchline does not simply refer to a funny action that the setup establishes beforehand; rather, it is the only clue toward the specific event that occurs off-panel. In this case, though the punchline is technically not the action,

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<sup>20</sup> Even if a reader interprets Linus as simply being dismissive to his sister, the comedy relies on the reader knowing that barbecuing is not a normal process for making hot chocolate.

imagining the action is only possible after reading the punchline. The imaginary action is an aftereffect of the punchline, and it is the focal point for the entire strip. “Hot Chocolate” features clues that allow the readers to imagine the focal action only after reading the punchline of the strip. By moving the action to a diegetic location that is both temporally and spatially off-panel, Schulz allows “Hot Chocolate” to focus entirely on the out-of-context motion, making the comical action into the end goal of the strip.



Fig. 3.6. Larson 56, Pet Store.

Whereas “Hot Chocolate” features a joke that focuses on an action outside of the diegetic space shown in the strip, certain comics jokes focus on actions that occur outside of the diegetic time shown in the strips. In other words, these actions occur either before or after the strip diegetically takes place, but they are still the foci of the strips’ jokes. A formal consequence of this diegetic timing is that these strips only display fictional worlds either “before” or “after” the

actions, implying motions through aftereffects or foreshadowing. These jokes must establish contexts, and then imply that actions either already have, or soon will, collapse those contexts. As a single panel cartoon (which therefore cannot imply motion between frames), *The Far Side* features many action-based jokes that exist entirely before or after implied actions. One such strip presents a peg-legged cat in a pet store next to a fish bowl labeled "Piranha" (Larson 56, ["Pet Store"], fig.

3.6). Strips such as "Pet Store" focus on actions that happen before the strips take place. In his commentary on "Pet Store," Gary Larson says that "the story's told by just the scene of a legless cat in a store with a piranha residing nearby in a fishbowl" (56). This "story" humorously challenges learned competencies about the interactions between pet cats and pet fish. Whereas cats often prey upon—or at least antagonize—helpless pet fish, the fish in "Pet Store" is anything but helpless. The piranha turns the cat's malicious intent back on itself, attacking the paws that attempt to attack him. "Pet Store" challenges learned competencies through a comically ironic inversion of the predator-prey relationship between cats and fish. Not only does this single-image cartoon imply a previous event, but it also relies on this event as the focal point of its humour. However, this action is technically not part of the setup or the punchline. Similar to "Hot Chocolate," the setup establishes a confusing scenario, and the punchline allows the audience to imagine the reason behind this scenario, completing a joke that refers to an unseen action.

Despite the fact that "Pet Store" refers to an action that occurred prior to the scene represented in the panel, the timing of this joke—the setup and the punchline—is entirely in the present. "Pet Store" is rare among *Far Side* strips because it has no caption; the image alone must be both the setup and the punchline. Similar to the "Street Physicians" cartoon discussed in Chapter Two, "Pet Store" features timing that requires readers to combine several elements of the image together in order to understand the scenario. The labels of "setup" and "punchline" are subjective in such a strip; there is no concrete reading order for elements of this image. This strip features two major elements that combine to form a joke, and readers can only "get" the joke after understanding both of these elements. The cat with the peg legs is one of the elements, presenting a visual

incongruity: why is this cat a double amputee? The cat's gaze directs the reader toward the open fishbowl, pointing the audience toward the solution for its mystery. Gunther Kress and Leo van Leeuwen say that in visual design, the "placement of elements . . . relate[s] them to each other and to the viewer" (183), and the placement of the cat's eyes relates the cat to the fishbowl. The fishbowl is another element of the joke, with the open bowl invoking the learned competency that cats often try to prey on pet fish. The label reading "Piranha" is the final joke element, relying on the background knowledge that piranha are predatory fish. Since this timing requires a combination of elements, readers cannot "spoil" the joke by reading the visual elements in various orders. Even if a reader sees the "Piranha" label first, he or she must spot the peg-legged cat before "getting" the joke. If a reader sees the cat last out of all the visual elements, its gaze still directs said reader toward the fish bowl, encouraging the reader to deduce the reason for the cat's amputation. The peg-legged cat and the piranha in a fishbowl can be either the setup or the punchline for this joke; the humour lies in the combination of these two visual elements. The two essential joke elements exist side-by-side in the same image, but both refer to a comical (if gruesome) action that occurs in the diegetic past.

Though the disarming action of "Pet Store" occurs in the diegetic past, for timing purposes the action only takes place after the reader reads both the essential joke elements. Again, this points out the difference between diegetic time and timing; the audience has to read the strip before understanding what happens in the diegetic past. The focal action is an integral component of the joke, and therefore this joke relies on readers achieving closure. Closure derives from imagining unseen sights based on in-panel clues, and the joke in "Pet Store" functions the same way. The cat and the fish are clues that allow readers to imagine the focal action. In other words, readers "get" the joke when they achieve closure and understand the action that occurred in the diegetic past. This seemingly simple cartoon makes an action joke that coincides with achieving closure, epitomizing the use of action in formalist comics comedy.

At first glance, action-based jokes may appear to be impossible in a static medium such as

comics; however, my analysis shows that these jokes are not only possible, but they thrive in a unique form that relies on the structure of comics. Comedy theory claims that actions themselves cannot be funny, and comics theory states that actions cannot literally exist in comics. Rather than impeding one another, these two facts combine to allow unique forms of action comedy in comic strips. Context makes implied actions funny in comedy, and context allows actions to exist in comics. Thus, the very process that allows comics to incorporate motion—imagining actions based on contextual clues—is inherently tied to the process that makes motions funny—perceiving incongruities between actions and their contexts. Contextual clues are the meat of both actions and action-based jokes in comics. These clues form the setups and punchlines of jokes, all while focusing on the unseen actions that underlie the comedy.

### **Section 3.4: Conclusion**

Though comics images are limited and static, the diegetic worlds that readers imagine based on comics images are expansive and active. The expansions and actions that readers imagine are necessarily based on the information present in the panels; comics images often contain visual elements that are diegetically larger than they appear. While they are only implied and not concrete, these visual elements can nonetheless be important to the diegeses of comic strips. Since these sights are both unseen and integral, alterations to the in-panel clues can result in alterations to the expanded diegetic worlds of the strips. These alterations can comically subvert cultivated expectations about the diegetic space, creating jokes that challenge how readers imagine fictional worlds based on the formal structure of comics.

## Chapter 4: Sound

### Section 4.1: Introduction

It may sound pedantic to say that sound is an important element of communicating humour, but it shouldn't: this written text doesn't *sound* like anything. Though terrible, this joke has an important point: there is no sound in a silent medium. Sounds are not technically present in comics; rather, comics artists use various visual tools in order to convey information about diegetic sounds. Using tools such as speech balloons and onomatopoeia, comics artists convey many of the crucial elements of sounds, such as their origins (tails of the balloons) and their tone or pitch (shapes of the balloons). By combining the information that these visual tools present, readers can include the implied sounds in their expanded diegetic worlds for the comics. Comics comedians create sound-based jokes by manipulating these visual tools. Comics sounds rely on readers understanding that silent visuals correspond to diegetic sounds, and sound-based comics jokes rely on this same understanding. However, formalist sound-based jokes do not only recruit this reader understanding: they challenge it as well. Readers' understandings of diegetic sounds are necessarily incomplete; no matter how much sonic information comic strips provide, readers cannot know exactly how the sounds sound. Formalist sound-based jokes stem from this inescapable lack of information about the diegetic world. Comics readers know that the implied sounds must be parts of the fictional worlds of the strips. Sound-based comics jokes complicate the inclusion of these sounds into the diegeses, challenging not only how the sounds sound, but also their origins, meanings and other aspects as well. These challenges involve incongruities that prevent the visual sounds from being easily understood. Formalist sound-based comics jokes revolve around incongruities in the visual tools of comics sound, humorously defying the readers' abilities to incorporate these sounds into the expanded diegetic worlds of the strips.

As an important element of the comics medium, sound is necessarily an important element of comics comedy as well. Many comics theorists regard visual sound as one of the fundamental components of the comics form (Harvey 38-39, Hatfield 138, Varnum xiv, Khordoc 156-73, to



name a few), and though individual comics may not include text, optical sound is a prominent aspect of the medium as a whole. Robert C. Harvey says that “we see and read the words of the characters just as we see the characters themselves and ‘read’ their actions” (39); sound in comics is entirely visual. The actions and the words of characters are both implied by still images, but they correspond to aspects of the diegetic world that are not stationary or not visual. There are many parallels between understanding actions and sounds in comics. In both cases, readers must imagine the diegetic events. Similar to actions, much of the sonic information comes in the form of contextual clues, such as the size of the letters and the source of the sound. However, unlike actions, sounds can take place in-panel, through words that are typically embedded in speech balloons. Catherine Khordoc states that “the balloon . . . marks the intersection between image and word. This seemingly innocuous black oval is simultaneously the separation between the panel’s illustration and its accompanying text, and the link between them” (156-57); the speech balloon is the point where sound and image combine in comics. This combination of sound and image results in what Chris Hatfield calls a “visual/verbal tension” (134). Hatfield says that this tension “results from the juxtaposition of symbols that function diegetically and symbols that function non-diegetically—that is, the mingling of symbols that ‘show’ and symbols that ‘tell.’ . . . In most comics, the symbols that show are representational drawings while the symbols that tell are words, balloons, and a few familiar icons” (134). Hatfield’s categories mark the split between sights and sounds in comics: sights are diegetic symbols that “show” information, whereas sounds are non-diegetic symbols that “tell” information.<sup>21</sup> Thus, whereas actions rely on contextual clues to show readers that they are present in this static medium, sounds rely on tools such as speech balloons and onomatopoeia to tell readers that they are present in this silent medium. These visual tools provide unique opportunities for comics comedy. The contents, positions, and shapes of speech balloons all convey important sonic information, and thus they all provide avenues for sound-based jokes. Sound-based jokes

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21 Not all non-diegetic symbols that “tell” represent sounds; for example, narration boxes are non-diegetic symbols that “tell” information, but they do not correspond to diegetic sounds. However, all diegetic sounds are represented by non-diegetic symbols that “tell.”

revolve around the visual tools of comics sound, challenging the audience's ability to imagine diegetic sounds based on the visual information that the strips provide.

Though the phrase "sound-based joke" may sound relatively self-explanatory, I intend it as a much more important (and limiting) definition than one might first infer. Similar to the action-based jokes of Section 3.3, sound-based jokes are not simply jokes that involve sound; rather, they are jokes that focus on sounds that have internal incongruities. Interestingly, though comics can show sounds in-panel, the punchlines of sound-based jokes rarely involve the sounds that are the bases of the jokes. Since these sounds introduce incongruities to the strips, it is often more practical for them to occur as prominent aspects of the setups, allowing the punchlines to address these incongruities. The punchlines may reveal (or explain) elements of the sounds, but the incongruous sounds (almost) always appear in the setup. Moreover, these jokes always revolve around the interpretation of sounds, not straightforward sounds that seem out of place in their contexts. For example, as funny as flatulence at a wedding may be to some people, it is not a sound-based joke; rather, it is an action-based joke (an action is out of place for its context) that happens to involve a sound. Even more importantly, since these jokes always revolve around the interpretation of sounds, calling them "formalist" is redundant. If a comics joke challenges a reader's ability to understand a comics sound, it must do so by manipulating the form of comics. If this assertion appears extravagant, consider that sound-based jokes are distinct from language-based jokes such as puns and other wordplay. Many comedy theorists pay particularly close attention to comedy based on language. Jerry Aline Flieger states that "comic effect could be understood as either an excess of meaning, resulting from *double entendre* (too much meaning in one word), or as a paucity of meaning, resulting from play with cliché or understatement (too little meaning in a wornout word)" (63, author's emphasis), and Delia Chiaro claims that "any joke, whether it contains a pun or not, by the very nature of its verbalization, necessarily plays on language" (15). Chiaro's statement employs a narrower definition of "joke" (basically, a funny verbal utterance) than would be warranted in a study of comics comedy, but she nonetheless reveals the central role language occupies in comedy

theory. Though entire theories of comedy revolve around the arbitrary relationship between word and meaning, my analysis of sound-based comics jokes will not involve linguistic theory. Rather, I see sound- and language-based jokes as two distinct categories (though they can overlap). Even seemingly sound-based language jokes are not necessarily sound-based *per se*. In a homophone pun, for example, the sound of the punned word is largely incidental; the comedy primarily comes from one word having two (or more) juxtaposed meanings. For my purposes, sound-based jokes focus on the interpretations of sound, and the interpretations of sound is only funny when the interpretations are challenged. In comics, sound-based jokes revolve around incongruous visual information about implied sounds, making these jokes inherently rooted in the visual structure of the comics form.

My definition of "sound-based joke" inspires an obvious question: how do jokes comically focus on the interpretation of sounds? Such jokes would require visuals that clearly correspond to sounds, despite featuring sonic incongruities such as absent or (seemingly) nonsensical information. These incongruities must be significant yet not extreme: too minor and readers might gloss over them; too major and readers might not realize that the visuals correspond to sounds at all. Murray S. Davis' passage on incongruities in comedy states that such a "humorous incongruity disorders what had been ordered, breaking open the frame and scattering its elements" (13); the visual sounds of sound-based jokes must be "ordered" aside from their conspicuous incongruities. These incongruities disintegrate expectation systems about the sounds. The incongruities are aspects of the sounds, such as undefined meanings or origins. The tools of visual sound must be clear enough that readers can identify the sounds as sounds, despite the necessary incongruities. Jokes can only challenge the interpretation of sounds if readers attempt to interpret visuals as sounds in the first place. In other words, "what had been ordered" must be a clear visual implication of diegetic sound, with a "humorous incongruity" that disorders the audience's ability to imagine the sound.

The incongruities that sound-based jokes marshal come in two major categories: challenges to sounds; and challenges to the visual tools of comics sound. The first category involves

interpreting sound in a general sense, featuring incongruities of what sounds mean and how sounds sound. In these jokes, the visual tools of comics sound are (largely) intact; the jokes focus on the process of imagining the diegetic sounds that correspond to the visuals, or in other words, on achieving closure. These jokes are similar to action-based jokes, with the important distinction that the sounds are not necessarily out of place for their contexts. Rather, the implied interpretations of the sounds are out of place; for example, the characters' reactions to diegetic sounds may be incongruous with the seemingly simple sounds that the visual tools present. The second category involves incongruities in the tools of comics sound. These jokes challenge the interpretation of comics sound by altering how these sounds are represented on the page. This variety of joke often involves collapsing select aspects of the visual tools of comics sound, such as the shapes or spatial orientations of speech balloons. As the most powerful—and most frequently used—symbol for comics sound, the speech balloon is the most common subject for jokes that collapse the visual tools of comics sound. Though they are slightly different in execution, these two styles of sound-based comics joke both represent formal challenges to the process of understanding comics sound, complicating how a silent medium displays sound.

#### **Section 4.2: Jokes on Interpreting Sounds**

The sounds of the real world inform how readers imagine the sounds of the fictional worlds of comic strips. Though this statement may seem obvious, it has important implications for analyzing jokes that focus on the interpretation of sound in comics. Audiences cannot experience comic strip sounds as sounds; however, they can incorporate these sounds into their diegetic worlds for the strips, using real-world sounds as templates. In other words, real-world interpretation of sound provides the learned competencies that allow comics readers to imagine sounds as elements of diegetic worlds. However, comic strips cannot visually represent all the sonic information of real-world sounds. For example, a reader cannot hear the specific nuances of a character's voice—if it is nasal, deep, etc.—but such properties are usually ignored if they are not important to the

narrative. By drawing attention to these unstated elements, comics comedians can create jokes that humorously reference the shortcomings of comics sound.



Fig. 4.1. Clark, "I Hear Voices."

The foremost defining characteristic of comics sound is the fact that it is a system of silent symbols. Diegetically, however, these sounds possess many of the nuances of real-world sounds, even though the visual tools do not precisely define them. This disjunction between diegetic sounds and their representations on the comics page leads to disjunctions between how comics readers and comics characters perceive sounds: characters diegetically hear the sounds, while readers have to

read them. Comically drawing attention to this disjunction can be a joke in and of itself. For example, the "I Hear Voices" strip of Anthony Clark's *Nedroid Picture Diary* (fig. 4.1) involves a joke where characters applaud Beartato for his uncanny vocal impressions. The setup features several examples of the differences between the characters' diegetic appreciations of sounds and the readers' visual interpretations of them. Beartato does not spout any catchphrases as imitations, using generic speech like "Hey guys." Even Beartato's insulting impression of Reginald does not involve language that comes directly from another character (for example, no running gags or "callbacks" to previous strips). All the audience sees is unremarkable text in the typical visual style, with the other characters reacting with delight. The characters' reactions to the sounds, rather than the sounds themselves, make this strip funny, and Reginald's sudden shift from delight to annoyance is the punchline.<sup>22</sup> The comedy in the strip revolves around the fact that the sounds are audible to the characters but silent to the readers. Unable to hear Beartato's impressions for themselves, not only can the readers not judge the accuracy of the mimicry, but they also cannot share Reginald and Harrison's delight in the accuracy of the impressions. The readers' experiences of the impressions are necessarily second-hand, observing Reginald and Harrison taking delight rather than taking delight themselves. Beartato's generic language prevents readers from understanding the impressions without the strip's contextual clues. "I Hear Voices" humorously points out that readers and characters approach comics sound fundamentally differently: characters hear the text, whereas readers "hear" through translating visual clues into imaginary sounds. This strip challenges the process of turning optical symbols into imaginary sounds, thereby playing with the very foundation of sound in comics: the fact that it is present only through its symbols.

The joke in "I Hear Voices" plays on an idiosyncrasy of comics form and hence is a sound-based joke, though not a complex one; however, some sound-based comics jokes feature sounds that do not simply fit into the strips' diegetic worlds. Such jokes take sound-based comics comedy

<sup>22</sup> This punchline incorporates non-formalist comedy—Reginald's annoyance at being mocked for his desire to be the centre of attention—that I will not deal with here. While this joke involves more than sound-based formalist humour, its focus on the undetectable tone of Beartato's speech grounds it in sound-based comics comedy. In practice, few comics jokes involve only one element of humour, but my analyses focus on only one element at a time.

further than “I Hear Voices” does, challenging not only how sounds sound, but how they relate to the worlds around them. Such strips may present (seemingly) impossible interpretations for sounds; in other words, the contexts of these sounds may imply interpretations that are incongruous with the visual representations of the sounds. These jokes present impossible relations between the context and text of comics sound, challenging how the implied sonic information combines to represent diegetic sound.

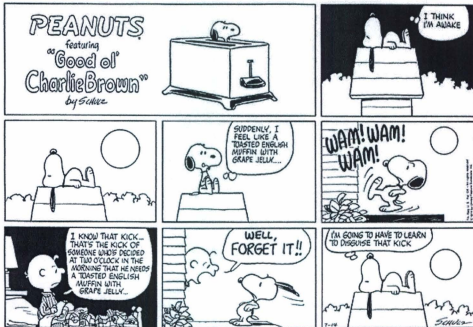


Fig. 4.2. Schulz Plate 119, Jelly.

One of the most important elements of interpreting sounds is discerning what the sounds mean; therefore, sound-based comics jokes sometimes feature sounds with comically mismatched meanings. Such jokes challenge what audiences can “read” from comics sound, presenting meanings that are incongruous with the visual tools used. One running sound-based gag in *Peanuts* involves Snoopy waking Charlie Brown by kicking the house door in the middle of the night, with a comically specific request for his master. Charlie Brown not only refuses his dog’s request, but interprets Snoopy’s intention perfectly, despite only hearing “WAM!” noises from the door. One

example of this running gag is the *Peanuts* strip from July 14, 1974 (Schulz Plate 119, ["Jelly"], fig. 4.2). Snoopy awakens with a desire for "a toasted English muffin with grape jelly" (panel four), and upon hearing a rapping at his house door, Charlie Brown exclaims, "that's the kick of someone who's decided at two o'clock in the morning that he needs a toasted English muffin with grape jelly" (panel six). Not only does this panel break the reader's expectation system of how much information someone can glean from a bang on the door, but it also begins a series of impossible interpretations that continue during the setup. First Charlie Brown understands too much from Snoopy's kick in panel six, and then Snoopy understands too much from Charlie Brown's rebuttal in panel eight, causing Snoopy to reason in the punchline that he's "going to have to learn to disguise that kick." Importantly for the joke, Snoopy knows that Charlie Brown understands his humorously specific intention, and admits that his kick gave him away. Readers can only comprehend Snoopy's desire through his internal monologue in panel four, but the dog and the master effectively communicate through a kick on a door, followed by a yell that ends the "conversation." Thus, not only does Charlie Brown divine a comically large amount of information from a simple "WAM," this information turns out to be diegetically appropriate, making his response into a two-fold challenge to sound interpretation in comics: he understands too much; he is nonetheless correct.

Diegetically, comic strip sounds possess all the same properties as real-world sounds; however, the visual tools of comics sound are necessarily approximations. It may be impossible to determine how comics sounds sound, or it may be difficult to incorporate the sounds into the diegetic worlds of the strips. Comedy comics can draw attention to these incongruities to provoke laughter, self-reflexively pointing out that the diegetic sounds involve more nuances than the visual tools of comics sound can convey.

### Section 4.3: Jokes on Visual Tools of Comics Sound

Since comics use a visual language of symbols to convey sounds, it follows that many



sound-based comics jokes would conspicuously and intentionally misuse the tools of comics sound. Though these tools involve numerous techniques such as lettering styles and non-verbal symbols indicating noises (McCloud 134), Scott McCloud claims that “the most widely-used, most complex and most versatile” (134) comics symbol is the speech balloon. Speech balloons are some of the most prevalent tools of visual comics sound, and thus they are common foci for sound-based comics jokes. Though they are generally called speech balloons, these symbols are not restricted to speech.<sup>23</sup> Speech is the most common type of sound that these balloons represent, but they can depict sounds such as music and onomatopoeia as well. However, no matter what sort of sounds the balloons convey, they still rely on similar visual tools. In order to understand speech balloons, comics theorist Catherine Khordoc claims that “the reader must take into account the image, the text, and other elements of the code which are more or less iconic in nature” (159). There are three major aspects of speech balloons: content, context, and form. The symbols within the balloons (text or other visual icons) are the contents, the locations of the balloons within their surrounding images are the contexts, and the visual—or iconic—representations of the balloons themselves are the forms. Corresponding to the meaning, origin and nature of the sound respectively, these three elements provide information that readers can use to imagine the diegetic sounds. All of these elements are rich sources for sound-based comics comedy. By defying even one of these aspects, comics comedians can complicate the process of understanding diegetic sounds based on speech balloons. The disordered aspects of the speech balloons become the focal points for the strips; the remaining aspects of the speech balloons still imply the presence of sounds, but the incongruities prevent straightforward understandings of the diegetic sounds. After setting up the incongruities, the jokes can comically reveal—or further confuse—the ambiguous sounds, pivoting around irregularities in the visual language of comics sound.

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23 Some theorists opt for the phrase “word balloon” (McCloud 134), but this term is also flawed. For instance, these balloons can contain musical notes (Schulz Plate 52, for example); musical notes are symbols that represent specific sounds, but they are not words. For lack of a better English term, I will use “speech balloon” to mean all comics balloons that imply diegetic sounds.



Fig. 4.3. Schulz Plate 127, Golf.

A straightforward challenge to the structure of a speech balloon is a disruption of the text inside the speech balloon. While the contexts and forms of speech balloons are certainly important, they often exist to augment and facilitate the contents of the balloons; in other words, to contextualize the sound. However, when speech balloons contain intentionally incomprehensible contents, the contexts and forms of the balloons must help provide the missing information. Such balloons depend primarily on contextual clues to help illuminate their contents. The *Peanuts* strip from October 27, 1974 (Schulz Plate 127, ["Golf"], fig. 4.3) prominently displays incongruous balloon contents, forcing readers to infer the meanings of the sounds based on contextual clues. This strip features Snoopy playing golf with Woodstock by his side. Snoopy has an expression that suggests he takes the game seriously, and Woodstock has a large speech balloon in each of the setup panels, filled to the brim with scratch marks. The contexts and forms of the balloons show that Woodstock's chicken scratches represent language: he is visibly speaking, with his mouth open and

the tail of the balloon pointing directly at him.<sup>24</sup> Many of the panels have (relatively) complex backgrounds and distinct changes in scenery (particularly panels four, five and six), giving the strip a slow timing due to a high density of detail. This timing causes the setup to build slowly, implying that Snoopy endures Woodstock's chatter for a long time. In the second-last panel Snoopy's frustration becomes visible, and he silences the bird in the final passage. The exclamation symbol over Woodstock's head shows his surprise and/or anger at this turn of events. Snoopy's action does not reveal what Woodstock has been saying, but it is a significant contextual clue about the sound. The timing of Woodstock's speech is another clue, implying that the chatter is related to Snoopy's golf game; every panel shows Snoopy either swinging or carrying golf clubs, so it stands to reason that the speech is associated with the game. Additionally, Snoopy never responds verbally, implying that Woodstock is talking at Snoopy, rather than with him. Snoopy's exaggerated action is the final clue, allowing readers to understand the impact of the sound without knowing its exact meaning. Schulz never reveals what Woodstock says, but the revelation that it is annoying permits an understanding of this otherwise incomprehensible text. The lack of defined meaning for Woodstock's text even augments the comedy of the joke: no matter what he is saying—be it advice, commentary, etc—it remains annoying. Furthermore, readers familiar with golf etiquette know that it is impolite to talk while golfers prepare to swing, and therefore the substance of Woodstock's speech is less important than the speech act itself. "Golf" is a sound-based joke that challenges the learned competency that the contents of speech balloons have meaning in and of themselves, and ultimately benefits from the incongruities in the focal sounds.

Though the content of speech balloons may appear to be the most important element of comics sound, many comics theorists (such as Khordoc and Hatfield) consider the spatial orientation of text within images to be the defining characteristic of comics sound, whether those sounds be speech balloons or other forms such as onomatopoeia. Though the text and images of

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<sup>24</sup> Additionally, many other *Peanuts* strips show that these marks represent Woodstock's communication (Schulz Plates 69, 72, 79, and 89, among others), but due to the forms and contexts of the balloons, this foreknowledge of the character is not necessary to get the joke.

comics are both visual, they operate through “different codes of signification” (Hatfield 138), the former linguistic and the latter iconic. However, this opposition is not absolute. Catherine Khordoc says that the speech balloon “is simultaneously the separation between the panel’s illustration and its accompanying text, and the link between them” (156-157). Speech balloons form these links due to their locations within images. The “tail” of a speech balloon points toward the speaker, or the words may exist in close proximity to their origin. Khordoc also claims that “in order to indicate which character is speaking, the balloon is usually drawn with a tail pointing to the speaker. Though this tail is generally drawn as part of the balloon, it also acts as an intermediary between the image and the balloon” (159). As Khordoc’s statement implies, the balloons themselves—the shapes that contain the text—do not (usually) interact with the diegetic visuals around them. Speaking of the visual arrangement of speech balloons within comics panels, Catherine Khordoc says that their “positioning allows for the linear direction in which we read” (160), and that “the balloon that is read first in the panel must also be what is logically the initial utterance in a conversation” (160). In other words, the visual locations of speech balloons depend primarily on the other balloons in the panels, rather than the images surrounding the balloons *per se*. Of course, there are many other factors that influence the placement of speech balloons in comics: these balloons should not obscure important visual elements, and they should be near their associated characters. However, it is important to note that these factors merely influence balloon placement, not control it. Khordoc gives the example that “the character speaking first (and whose speech balloon is on the left side of the panel) cannot appear in the right side of the panel, if there are other characters speaking within that same panel, for the simple reason that the panel would appear very muddled” (160). Khordoc’s language in this case is too strong: she should say that such a character “should not” not appear in the right side of the panel, rather than “cannot.” Rather than splitting hairs, this difference between “can” and “should” introduces an opening for formalist comics comedy: speech balloons that consciously muddle their pictorial contexts.



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Fig. 4.4. Walker, Skirt.

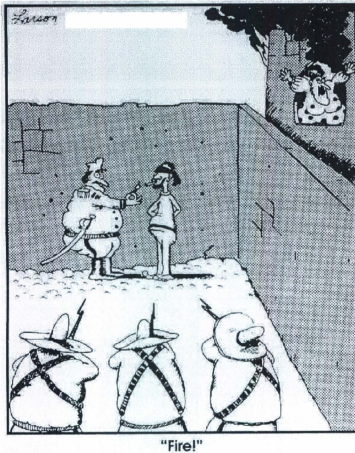
Like Khordoc, comics readers understand that speech balloons should not obscure or confuse the surrounding panels; therefore, balloons that intentionally muddle panels can collapse this expectation and cause the readers to laugh. The *Beetle Bailey* strip from August 12, 2009 (Cartoonist Group 37152, ["Skirt"], fig. 4.4) contains two such speech balloons. In the first panel, Private Blip tells General Halftrack that "Miss Buxley tore her skirt on a nail and has to sew it up"; the head and feet of Miss Buxley appear above and below this balloon, with the text conspicuously covering the torn skirt. This balloon sets up an incongruity: why does it obscure the character that is the centre of attention? When General Halftrack asks Blip, "Why do you keep rattling on?", the Private responds with another balloon obscuring Miss Buxley, saying that, "I have to cover her up until she finds a needle and thread." This second balloon is a punchline that answers the incongruity of the first balloon and reveals that the seemingly inappropriate balloon placement is intentional. Blip protects Buxley from the ogling eyes of Halftrack (and the readers) by placing her visual sounds in an unexpected context. This exploitation of comics' visual sound is not the only reason why "Skirt" is funny<sup>25</sup>; however, the rest of the joke hinges around Blip's speech balloons defying reader expectation and intentionally muddling the panels.

While strips such as "Skirt" make formalist jokes by placing comics sounds in seemingly inappropriate pictorial contexts, other strips can make formalist jokes by removing comics sounds from their pictorial contexts. Speech balloons consolidate visual sonic information into a compact package; comics comedians can subvert the tools of comics sound by separating this information.

25 "Skirt" also confuses the difference between diegetic and extra-diegetic visuals. For example, how does a speech balloon—an extra-diegetic symbol corresponding to diegetic sound—cover Miss Buxley from the eyes of General Halftrack? Furthermore, how is Private Blip aware of, and able to control, the location of her speech balloons? Is she aware that she is obscuring Buxley from the reader as well as the General? It will suffice to say that "Skirt" is comically aware of its own artifice. Such jokes are the topic of Section 5.2 of this thesis.

Speech balloons locate words next to the characters that utter them, keeping the speakers and the spoken in close proximity. An effective way to collapse this spatially oriented text is to remove it, opting instead for words that exist outside of the images. It may seem like removing the text from the image would nullify the visual tools of comics sound in their entirety, but this is not necessarily the case. The images may contain other contextual indicators of sound—such as characters with gaping mouths—but without the spatially oriented text, the sonic information is split into multiple visual locations: one for the context, and another for the text. Gary Larson's *The Far Side* uses speech balloons very rarely, opting instead for captions located outside the images. Like the *New Yorker* and *MAD* magazine cartoonists that came before him, Larson segregates text and image in his captions, allowing for sound-based jokes that can exist only by foregoing spatially oriented comics sound.

Rather than being a simple aesthetic choice, Larson's use of captions allows for comedic opportunities that would be impossible with speech balloons. Some *Far Side* cartoons have captions containing speech, text that a comics artist could insert into an image next to its speaker. Larson does not spatially orient the speech, allowing for sound-based jokes that revolve around the separation of the text and context of comics sound. An example of the comedic potential of separating speaker and spoken comes from a *Far Side* cartoon that features a firing squad, a shocked captain surrounded by bullet marks, and a woman leaning out the window of a burning building, with the caption "Fire!" (Larson 78, ["Fire"], fig. 4.5). This cartoon involves a pun on the word "fire," but homophonic puns are not sound-based jokes in and of themselves. However, the timing of this pun makes this cartoon into a more complex sound-based joke than it may first appear. By placing the speech after the picture instead of inside it, Larson creates a sound-based joke where the context and text of the sound are elements of the setup, and the realization of the diegetic sound—and its effect on the diegetic world—is the punchline. Like other single panel cartoons mentioned earlier (such as "Street Physicians"), the timing of "Fire" revolves around the fact that neither the image nor the caption are complete jokes in and of themselves. Rather, the joke



"Fire!"

Fig. 4.5. Larson 78, Fire.

only works after realizing the relation between the caption and the image, and this realization gives readers the necessary information to imagine the diegetic sound and realize its effect on the diegetic world. The image indicates the context and source of the sound: the woman's gaping mouth labels her as the speaker. The caption shows what she says, and the combination of image and caption shows that she inadvertently triggers the firing squad. The joke does not depend on the separation of text from its context, but this segregation is integral for the timing of the joke. The joke is funny in part because the wrong person says the right word at the wrong time, adding to the comedy of the homophone pun. Though comical, the pun and the mismatched communication do not directly

relate to the structure of comics. However, the timing of this joke uses the comics form to convey a sudden spark of comedy: the pun and the mismatched communication depend on the audience understanding the diegetic sound. This understanding requires knowledge of both the image and the caption, and thus the timing of the joke necessarily reserves the punchline for last. The sound is the punchline of this joke, and readers can only understand the sound after realizing both its context—image—and text—caption. Though captions are common components of *The Far Side* (and of other similar cartoons), strips such as “Fire” show the power of spatially oriented text by using a lack of speech balloons for comedic effect.

The speech balloon is not simply a tool for contextualizing text; it is also an image in and of itself. The image of the balloon—its shape, border, colour, etc.—can also convey sonic information, and therefore comics comedians can use the forms of speech balloons as elements of sound-based jokes. Speaking of the nature of a speech balloon, Catherine Khordoc says that “it is also [an] image because the balloon’s form is indeed a drawing—it is not made up of letters and words, but of a drawn, black oval” (160). Though speech balloons can take many more forms than ovals, Khordoc rightly notes that a balloon is a drawing, like any other visual element of a comic. These drawings often take the form of Khordoc’s ovals, but the most comically significant balloon forms are those that diverge from the standard shape. Scott McCloud states that “variations in balloon shape are many and new ones are being invented every day” (134), displaying examples such as over-sized balloons with small text representing whispers, jagged balloons representing shouting, and rigidly angled balloons representing mechanical sounds (such as telephone conversations). To make formalist jokes that challenge the shapes of speech balloons, all artists need to do is invent intentionally puzzling balloon styles. Such balloons could have text and context, but the forms could confound the readers’ abilities to understand them as sounds.





Fig. 4.6. Schulz Plate 43, *Spray Cans*.

Though comics readers may be accustomed to many different styles of speech balloons, a perplexing balloon image can comically confuse the visual tools of comics sound. The *Peanuts* strip from August 16, 1970 (Schulz Plate 43, ["Spray Cans"], fig. 4.6) is an example of such a joke. The setup of this joke involves Lucy promising to show Schroeder something that he doesn't know. She then returns and blasts a cloud of jumbled musical notes from a spray can, in an image that evokes a misshapen speech balloon. In the final panel Lucy reveals that—somehow—"Beethoven now comes in spray cans," and the cloud of notes settles over Schroeder's piano like a musical fog. Clearly this mystifying mist is supposed to represent sound: the cloud contains text (jumbled musical notes) and has a form similar to a speech balloon. However, despite the superficial similarities between this cloud and a speech balloon, its form defies the visual tools of comics sound. Based on its appearance, what could such a cloud possibly sound like? Perhaps the spray can blasts an entire sonata in a split-second. This interpretation would account for the jumble of notes in panel seven, but then why would it roll like a cloud in panel eight? Is it a self-contained bank of

scrambled music, a physical pile of dediachronized notes straight from the hell of the classical pianist? Readers cannot know; there is no real-world analog for a symphony-scented air freshener. Formally, the cloud has both text and context: it contains musical notes—jumbled notes, but notes nonetheless—and it has an origin—the spray can in Lucy’s hand. Yet, the implausible form of the cloud baffles any attempt to determine how the sound sounds. While all comics sound has some level of ambiguity—who’s to say exactly what Charlie Brown’s voice sounds like?—the noise in “Spray Cans” takes this inevitable ambiguity to the N<sup>th</sup> degree. This ambiguity is the source of the comedy in this strip. Schulz presents something so suddenly baffling that laughter may be the most logical response. If the image in panel seven is confusing on its own, Lucy’s “explanation” that the can sprays classical fog is even more perplexing. Lucy’s line is the punchline for the strip, conspicuously ignoring the absurdity that just occurred and serving to further complicate the focal sound, rather than explaining it. Odd to be sure, “Spray Cans” presents readers with visual sound that defies the ability to imagine diegetic sound. The fact that this noise is incomprehensible is the crux of the joke. It challenges the learned competency that comics sound is comprehensible through a combination of text and context. The Beethoven Blast has text and context, but yet its form renders it a baffling jumble, humorously challenging the conventions of comics sound.

As one of the most prominent tools of comics sound, the speech balloon is also one of the most common targets for sound-based comics jokes. The content, context and form of these balloons all convey visual sonic information, and sound-based comics jokes can collapse each of these elements for the purposes of comedy. Speech balloons allow comics artists to place text (and other symbols) inside icons that represent sound, and spatially orient these icons within images. Each aspect of these balloons provides a potential avenue for formalist comics comedy, challenging how readers understand comics sound based on silent visuals.

#### **Section 4.4: Conclusion**

It may sound obvious at this point to say that sound humour in comics works by challenging

how readers interpret optical sounds. Every tool that comics artists use to imply sound is another opening that comics comedians can exploit for laughs, and even the idea of visual sound is a comical contradiction in and of itself. Comic strips can call the context, text, and nature of visual noise into question, challenging the sonic interpretive process that is a defining component of comics literacy. By leaving the visual tools of comic sound mostly intact, comics comedians can insure that readers realize that the focal sounds are sounds; by challenging select elements of these sounds, they can comically complicate the readers' abilities to incorporate these sounds into the diegetic worlds of the strips. Collapsing the interpretive process of sound is one of the funniest aspects of comic strips, even if this chapter does not sound particularly funny.

## Chapter 5: Diegesis

### Section 5.1: Introduction

The reading process for any fictional text involves more than understanding individual elements of a diegetic world; it also involves relating the various elements to one another as a means of assembling the parameters of a diegetic world. Combining these elements is as important as any of the elements in isolation, and comics writers can challenge this unifying process for laughs. In the previous three chapters I examined how formalist comics comedy uses representations of time, unseen sights, and sounds to challenge the reading process. I have used case studies to explore these elements rather than speaking of them in the abstract. However, even strips that do not present incongruities of time, unseen sights, or sounds specifically may still challenge the interpretive process. Though my analyses have focused on only one element of comics comedy at a time, the majority of comic strips combine several (if not all) of these aspects. Readers connect timing, sight,<sup>26</sup> and sound to create diegetic worlds for comic strips.<sup>27</sup> Imagining the diegesis is a constituent part of the reading process, breathing imaginary life into the text and the sequences of still-life images. However, this step is no more straightforward than the ones that precede it, and a comics comedian can use a punchline to twist a diegesis into a humorous parody of the expectation system that the setup promotes. Even if the individual diegetic elements are simple, the interrelations of these elements may lead to complex jokes. Diegesis-based jokes can present seemingly incongruous combinations of elements that their punchlines humorously explain, or seemingly simple combinations of elements that their punchlines humorously complicate. In either

26 Though Chapter Three deals with jokes based on unseen sights, the diegetic worlds of comic strips incorporate both seen and unseen sights.

27 As I mentioned in Chapter Two, timing and diegetic time are not the same. Diegetic time is the time that passes in the narrative, while timing is the amount of time that it takes to convey the narrative to the reader. Though this chapter deals with comedy that comes from the diegeses of strips, I will not specifically analyze diegetic time. It will suffice to say that many comics theorists such as Scott McCloud (95, 101), Ann Miller (104-105), Robert C. Harvey (39), and Chris Hatfield (135) see diegetic time as a product of the content of the comics panels: the sights, sounds and timings that make up the diegesis. Miller, for example, lists four categories of diegetic time in comics: "ellipsis", where events within the diegesis are missed out of the recounting; "scene", where continuous dialogue allows for the postulation of equivalence between 'time' of narration and time within the diegesis; 'summary', which falls between scene and ellipsis; and 'pause', taken up by description, where no time passes in the diegetic world" (104-105). All of these categories depend on the events within the panels. Since my joke analyses are not overly concerned with diegetic time, I will privilege the events of the panels—the sights and sounds, and the timing thereof—and view diegetic time as consequences of said events.

case, these jokes revolve around the fictional natures of the strips and the reader's obligation to imagine fictional worlds based on diegetic elements. In the same way that comic strips require readers to make assumptions about timing, unseen sights, and sounds based on in-panel clues, comic strips also require readers to make assumptions about diegetic worlds based on the interrelations of the aforementioned formal elements. By challenging the fundamental assumptions that underlie the fictional world, diegesis-based comics jokes humorously address the fact that these strips are fictions.

Since comics evoke diegetic worlds through timing, sight, and sound, it follows that diegesis-based comics jokes also play on this combination. Comics readers determine the timing, unseen sights, and sounds of strips based on in-panel clues; in turn, readers combine these three elements and the in-panel diegetic images<sup>28</sup> to create imaginary worlds for the strips. Sight- and sound-based jokes present contextual clues that challenge the reader's ability to imagine those elements; similarly, diegesis-based jokes present combinations of timing, sight, and sound that challenge the reader's ability to relate those elements to one another.

Though they combine complex diegetic elements, diegesis-based jokes have relatively simple structures. Like many of the previously discussed styles of formalist comics comedy, diegesis-based jokes revolve around incongruities. There are two major categories of diegesis-based jokes. One form presents incongruities in setups and addresses<sup>29</sup> them in punchlines, and another form presents seemingly straightforward setups and disrupts them with incongruous punchlines. The comedy of diegesis-based jokes comes from their incongruities rather than their simple structures. Since these jokes hinge on relationships between diegetic elements, their incongruities necessarily involve these relationships as well. The diegetic elements are often simple in and of themselves. This simplicity strengthens diegesis-based jokes: clear elements can make for clear incongruities between these elements. The two styles of diegesis-based jokes—which I shall

28 As opposed to extra-diegetic images, such as speech balloons and panel borders. Section 5.3 will elaborate on the distinction between diegetic and extra-diegetic visuals in comic strips.

29 Comics comedians can address these incongruities in various ways, such as negating them, reinforcing them, or even simply mentioning them. For diegesis-based jokes, it is essential for the punchline to acknowledge the incongruous setup; the exact manner of this acknowledgement is largely incidental.

characterize as self-aware jokes and false-assumption jokes—represent two distinct methods of creating diegetic incongruities for the purposes of comedy.

The first of these, the self-aware joke, involves knowing references to the artifice of the diegeses, comically pointing out the fact that these strips are fictional. Such jokes frequently feature incongruities in their setups that the punchlines then address. Comics comedians can cultivate these diegetic incongruities by combining seemingly incompatible elements, such as apparently mismatched sights and sounds. The punchline does not reconcile the differences between the conflicting diegetic elements of the setup; rather, it addresses the incompatibility self-reflexively, bringing the oddness to the forefront instead of revealing the seeming incompatibility as compatibility. Self-aware diegesis jokes present already disrupted setups and self-reflexively address these disruptions in their punchlines. These punchlines observe the diegetic incongruities of the setups, expressing the knowledge of real-world spectators of a fiction rather than that of diegeses presumed to follow the rules of the real world. These sudden shifts in perspective allow these strips comically to point out the incongruities in their own diegeses. These strips are humorously self-aware, incorporating the fictional nature of comic strips as another element of the comedy.

Rather than finding humor in the fictional nature of a strip, the second kind of diegesis-based joke—the false-assumption joke—finds humor in the assumptions that readers must make in order to render coherent the diegetic worlds of the strips. These jokes manipulate the readers' assumptions, presenting unexpected twists that comically defy the previously implied fictional worlds. The setups of these jokes lead readers to make assumptions about the diegeses, and the punchlines collapse these assumptions for laughs. These assumptions can take many forms: for example, a setup could imply that a talking cartoon animal is unremarkable, perhaps by showing a dog casually talking to its owner about its food. The punchline of such a joke could comically defy the implications of the setup, showing that the diegetic world is not as the setup implies. To continue the above example, in the punchline the owner could ignore the dog's statements about its

food, and instead shout, "You can talk?" The nature of the implication is largely incidental; for the structure of the joke, it is enough that the punchline quickly dispels the implication. The setup implies one interpretation of the diegesis, and the punchline refutes this interpretation, offering a new interpretation in its place. Structurally, a false-assumption joke has a simple form: the setup establishes a system, and the punchline shatters that system. This system is an implied interpretation of the diegetic world of the strip. These jokes are noteworthy not for their common structure, but for their uncommon execution of that structure; they feature punchlines that turn seemingly simple assumptions into diegesis-shattering incongruities. Their punchlines collapse diegeses that their setups clearly imply, instantly turning straightforward strips into jokes that challenge the reading process for comics.

## Section 5.2: Self-Aware Diegesis Jokes

Comic strip readers—individuals even minimally accustomed to reading comic strips—understand that comic strips are fictional works intended to be comical. This understanding assists in the reading process, allowing readers to accept on faith oddities—such as the incongruous sights and sounds discussed in Chapters Three and Four—that will prove to be important to the comedy. Even if elements do not seem to fit into the diegetic worlds of the strips, readers accept that these elements fit into the strips themselves. Therefore, at some level, even the most inexplicable incongruities are explicable: they exist in order to be funny. These incongruities may be incomprehensible in their respective diegetic worlds, but they are nonetheless comprehensible to readers who perceive them as elements of jokes. Comics comedians can create jokes that incorporate the knowledge that comic strips are artificial. If a punchline suddenly refers to this artifice—such as by breaking the "fourth wall"<sup>30</sup> and stating that the strip is a joke—the strip can

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30 I will label any meta-reference to the reality of comic strips—that they are fictional jokes composed of images and text, intended for the amusement of audiences—as "breaking the fourth wall." I am borrowing this term from the theatre. Though lacking the physical performance space of theatre, comic strips feature a metaphorical fourth wall that separates the diegetic worlds of the strips from the real worlds of the readers. Metaphorical fourth walls are part of the reading process that allows audiences to translate still comics visuals into representations of time, action and sound. These walls separate the fiction of the strips—the diegetic worlds—from the reality of the strips—images

comically reveal that the diegetic world is aware of its own artifice. Such punchlines can humorously explain the diegetic incongruities in their associated setups: the setups are incongruous in order to be funny. Self-aware diegesis jokes comically refer to the fact that the strips are fictional constructions.

The punchlines of self-aware diegesis jokes comically disrupt expectation systems by expressing knowledge of their own artifice; however, the strips do not cultivate the expectation systems that they disrupt. Rather, these strips shatter expectation systems that exist independently of the strips themselves. Comic strips represent both diegetic worlds and crafted jokes. Readers necessarily understand this dual nature, but they may not consciously register it while reading. In *Biographia Literaria*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes of the “willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” (314); this “poetic faith” allows Coleridge’s readers to “transfer from [their] inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth” (314) for the author’s “persons and characters supernatural” (314). The “willing suspension of disbelief” enables readers to treat fictional events as factual, despite knowing that they are fictional. In other words, “disbelief” and its “willing suspension” are two expectation systems about fictional works: the former system expects the works to be fictional stories, while the latter system expects the works to be fictional stories masquerading as factual accounts (and consciously accepts this masquerade). Likewise, comic strip readers are aware that the strips are artificial constructions, but they can suspend this knowledge for the sake of the comedy. Self-aware diegesis jokes point out the artificial nature of the strips, comically reminding readers of the disbelief that they already suspended. Self-aware diegesis jokes manipulate preexisting—rather than cultivated—expectation systems. To clarify the distinction between preexisting and cultivated expectation systems, take the example of “Car,” an *hors champ* joke from Chapter Three, which will serve as an example of jokes that disrupt cultivated expectation systems. The setup of “Car” implies that Linus’s father is going to the store. The punchline reveals that he is not going to the store, shattering Linus’s expectation. In the process



of reading the setup, readers probably assume along with Linus that his dad is going to the store, since Linus's perspective is the best clue that readers have as to the father's action. Thus, this strip cultivates an expectation system in its setup, and shatters that expectation with an incongruous punchline. Self-aware diegesis jokes use a similar structure but function differently. They do not need to cultivate their expectation systems, and can instead rely on readers possessing and suspending the knowledge that comic strips are crafted fictions.

Though self-aware diegesis jokes do not need to cultivate their conflicting perspectives, they do need to cultivate reasons for readers to switch between these perspectives. Self-aware diegesis jokes comically recruit the knowledge that comic strips are artificial, but they do not recruit this knowledge randomly or without provocation. Every self-aware reference to the nature of fiction is not necessarily funny, just as every incongruity is not a joke; comedy requires setups as well as punchlines, not simply one or the other. A self-aware diegesis joke sets up its punchline by cultivating diegetic incongruities in its setup. This setup involves seemingly incompatible representations of timing, sight, and/or sound. Readers (probably) expect that there are reasons for this juxtaposition, and depending on their level of experience with comic strips, they may expect that this juxtaposition is the focus of the joke. Thus, the incongruities in the setup encourage readers to wonder why the strip includes seemingly incompatible diegetic elements. Even if readers do not consciously ponder the juxtaposition, the unexplained incongruities still set up punchlines that refer to the artifice of the strip in order to "explain" the diegesis. These references to the fact that strips are crafted fictions offer surprising—but appropriate—reasons for the diegetic incongruities. Self-aware diegesis jokes have simple structures. Murray S. Davis states that "from an expected continuation within one system, the comic mind pivots around an ambiguity to branch off into another system" (18); suspension of disbelief is the first system, promotion of disbelief is the second system, and the incongruous setup is the ambiguity, giving the punchline an opportunity to "branch off" and "explain" the incongruity by revealing that the diegetic world is artificial. An effective punchline cannot be random or without provocation; therefore, self-aware diegesis jokes

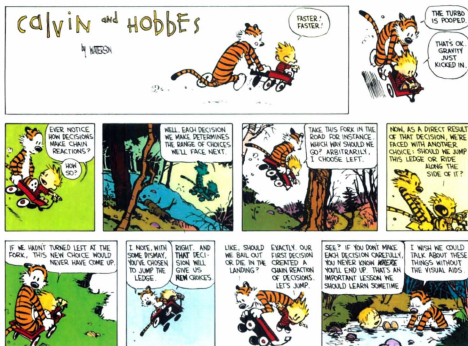


Fig. 5.1. Watterson 105, *Wagon*.

have to cultivate diegetic incongruities in order to set up their diegesis-shattering punchlines.

Bill Watterson is particularly prone to making such self-aware jokes; one example comes from a *Calvin and Hobbes* strip where the two main characters philosophize while careening down a hill in a wagon (Watterson 105, ["Wagon"], fig. 5.1). By themselves, neither the sights nor sounds of "Wagon" are particularly intricate. The actions flow through straightforward breakdowns, showing Calvin and Hobbes rolling down a hill and crashing into a brook. The dialogue follows a simple progression, with each balloon logically leading into the next. However, the tone of the speech—a contextual element that readers must divine based on clues—hints at the underlying incongruity in this strip. The text itself—the content of the balloons—implies a measured tone, evident from such scholarly diction as, "I note, with some dismay . . ." However, the text in "Wagon" does not exist independently of the images, and the violence of the wagon ride influences the speech as well. For example, Calvin's gaping mouth in panel six implies that he yells that panel's text. He shouts that "now, as a direct result of that decision, we're faced with another

choice"; Calvin's speech conveys a tone—a metaphorical tone more than tone of voice—that is out of place in conjunction with the action. The context for the dialogue implies that the characters should be dismayed or excited, while the text implies that the characters are unhurried and thoughtful. This disjunction between text and context is the incongruity that drives the comedy of "Wagon." Neither the action nor sound of "Wagon" is the focus of the joke; though humorous, these elements do not hold any significant comedic "payoff" in and of themselves. The disunity between action and sound is the crux of the joke, making for a humorous diegetic incongruity in the setup.

The force of the punchline in "Wagon" comes from its self-aware addressing of the seemingly mismatched action and sound. The final panel of "Wagon" is relatively—and, in *Calvin and Hobbes* strips, typically—complex, featuring first a small joke, then a self-aware punchline. Calvin speaks first after the crash, saying that "if you don't make every decision carefully, you never know where you'll end up. That's an important lesson we should learn sometime." Calvin implies that the choices he makes in the strip—for example, to "arbitrarily... choose left" and "to jump the ledge"—are careless, and expresses some regret that his hasty decisions end with him getting all wet. Though self-reflexive and funny, this quip is not the punchline for the strip. Hobbes closes the cartoon by saying, "I wish we could talk about these things without the visual aids," a self-aware punchline that comically points out why "Wagon" has contrasting action and sound. Though careening wagons and intellectual discourse are usually incompatible, they serve a similar structural purpose in this strip: to facilitate a comical discussion. When Hobbes mentions "visual aids," he indicates the role of this strip's juxtaposition between sight and sound: to provide "visual aids" for the conversation.

Much of the humour of Hobbes's punchline comes from his knowledge of how this juxtaposition functions in the strip. From Calvin and Hobbes's perspective, the careening wagon is not so much a "visual aid" as it is an impetus for contemplation. However, the diegetic knowledge of the characters is (largely) irrelevant to this joke; the phrase "visual aids" is self-aware no matter why the character says it. Bill Watterson is the joke teller rather than Hobbes, and Watterson's

commentary on "Wagon" reveals that the phrase "visual aids" is intentionally self-aware. Watterson says that the action in this strip is "a silly counterpoint to the text" (104) and "a visual metaphor for the topic of discussion" (104). The force of the punchline does not come from the visual metaphor directly, but from Hobbes presenting a real-world perspective on the diegetic world while remaining in the diegetic world. The punchline of "Wagon" points out that the runaway wagon is a visual metaphor for the strip's philosophic dialogue, providing a factual explanation for an otherwise perplexing juxtaposition of sight and sound within the fiction.

Rationalizing an incongruous setup is not the only way to comically present a realistic view on a fictional world. "Wagon" is a relatively simple example of a self-aware diegesis joke. Its punchline is straightforward, offering a real-world explanation for an incongruous setup. However, self-aware diegesis jokes do not always explain their incongruities; their punchlines can simply observe that there are incongruities in their setups. Though such a "punchline" may not sound funny at first, such a joke not only provides a surprising perspective on the setup, but it also provides a perspective that mirrors that of the reader. Again, the setup of a self-aware diegesis joke must not comment on its own incongruity; in order to preserve the force of the punch, the incompatibility between diegetic elements must remain unaddressed until the punchline. The punchline comments on the incongruity that the setup cultivates, thus revealing that it "knows" this incongruity exists. Such a punchline comically appears to "understand" the setup: it acknowledges that the setup cultivates an incongruity. These jokes refer to their incongruities only after their setups establish them, paralleling the reading process for comic strips. Such a self-aware punchline mirrors the knowledge of a comics reader, stating what the reader knows but disregards while suspending disbelief.

Though it is a complex joke with many comical elements, the *Peanuts* strip from September 24, 1972 (Schulz Plate 74, ["Column"], fig. 5.2) nonetheless hinges around a self-aware punchline that addresses the incongruities in the setup. The setup of the strip shows Snoopy writing a dog advice column, forming an example of comically mismatched systems: a dog is offering advice to

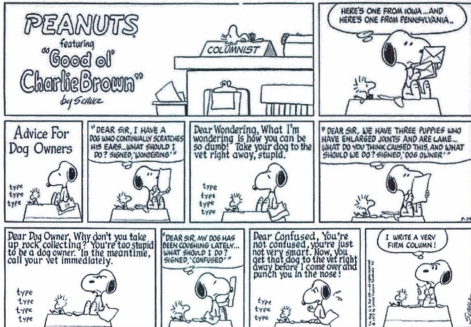


Fig. 5.2. Schulz Plate 74, Column.

dog owners. Additionally, Snoopy responds to his readers with humorously exaggerated threats such as, "Get that dog to the vet right away before I come over there and punch you in the nose." Though comical on its own, this setup requires a punchline in order to be a joke. The punchline of "Column" does not expand upon, explain or counteract the humour that the setup establishes; rather, it focuses on the severity of Snoopy's responses. Snoopy says that "I write a very firm column," a punchline that is complex despite its apparent simplicity. This line self-reflexively addresses both the exaggeration and the mismatched systems of the setup, comically demonstrating that the punchline is "aware" of the strip's diegetic incongruities.

The punchline of "Column" is self-aware in several ways, the most obvious of which is the deadpan understatement about the severity of Snoopy's advice. Snoopy's column is decidedly "very firm" in recommending veterinary visits for every malady. However, he accompanies these recommendations with threats of personal violence, transforming the column offering advice into one dispensing orders. Threats of physical violence are incongruous with advice columns, so

readers will (almost certainly) register that "very firm" is an understatement. However, the understatement does not make "Column" into a self-aware diegesis joke in and of itself. The punchline does not simply understate the nature of an incongruity; it understates the nature of an incongruity that the setup establishes. "Column" is self-aware in that its punchline makes a deadpan joke on its setup, referring to the comically exaggerated severity of Snoopy's advice column.

The understatement of Snoopy's firmness is only one aspect of the self-aware comedy in "Column"; the strip also relies on conspicuously ignoring its own incongruities. The setup features two primary incongruities: a dog is writing a dog advice column, and the column is comically harsh. The punchline conspicuously fails to comment on either of these incongruities; however, it implicitly acknowledges them. Rather than using comical understatement, the punchline of "Column" addresses the strip's incongruities through tacit but obvious refusal to note the incongruities. "Column" is a self-aware diegesis joke because its punchline conspicuously ignores the mismatched systems of its setup. To return to the example from earlier, "Column" is akin to a comics joke where a dog owner responds to his talking dog by saying, "You speak well for a dog"; it implicitly acknowledges that dogs cannot speak, but it does not directly state it. Likewise, the punchline of "Column" implicitly acknowledges that dogs do not write advice columns, and that advice columns are not (usually) violent. Snoopy states that "*I write a very firm column*" (my emphasis), implicitly acknowledging that he is a dog giving advice about dog ownership. Despite drawing attention to this incongruity, the punchline does not comment on it. Furthermore, when Snoopy states that the column is firm, he acknowledges—but does not address—the reason why. The violence of Snoopy's hostility to dog owners lies in the (unacknowledged) fact that he is a dog and pet himself; it is comically appropriate for a pet dog to be angry at incompetent dog owners. Thus, the "firmness" of the column hints toward the underlying incongruity that a pet dog is telling people how to care for their pet dogs. The punchline of "Column" conspicuously ignores the strip's two primary incongruities, making this strip into a self-aware diegesis joke.

One final aspect of the self-aware comedy in "Column" comes from the fact that the

punchline breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the reader. Snoopy's gaze in the final panel looks directly out of the comic and toward the audience, and since he is not looking at Woodstock (the only other character present), Snoopy's words appear to be directed at the audience. Snoopy makes an aside to the audience, an opportunity to speak directly to the reader and comment on the events displayed in the setup. However, instead of addressing the incongruous authorship of his column, Snoopy simply makes a deadpan observation about its severity. By speaking to the audience about the setup, Snoopy implicitly acknowledges that the audience observes the setup, or in other words, that they see him writing a dog advice column. By declining to comment on the incongruity after acknowledging it, he acts as if nothing is odd. Thus, "Column" is a deadpan self-aware digression joke: it is a self-aware joke that acts as if it is unaware of itself.

Comic strips readers and authors know that comic strips exist in order to be funny; however, the strips themselves usually appear to be oblivious to this fact. The fabricated nature of the strips lies just below the surface of their diegetic worlds; readers can rationalize any inexplicable incongruities by acknowledging that artists put them there in order to be funny. Comics comedians can challenge this rationalization by presenting strips that are aware of their own comedy. These strips unexpectedly present real-world perspectives on their own fiction, showing that these jokes are comically aware of their own existence as jokes.

### **Section 5.3: False-Assumption Jokes**

The interrelations of diegetic elements like timing, unseen sights, and sounds lead readers to make assumptions that inform their interpretations of diegetic worlds. Like these individual diegetic elements, diegetic worlds exist by way of implication. For example, a golf swing (action) shortly followed by a "crash" onomatopoeia (timing and sound) may lead readers to believe that the ball went wildly off course (an assumption about the diegetic world). These assumptions allow readers to achieve illusions of diegetic coherence, imagining that the timing, sights, and sounds of comics combine to form living worlds. Assumptions about diegetic coherence are hardly unique to the

comics reading process, but they are integral to this process nonetheless. Comics comedians can create jokes by undermining assumptions about diegetic coherence. In the above example, if the strip's punchline reveals that the golf ball was perfectly on course, the joke can comically challenge the assumption that it previously led readers to draw. In other words, the setup encourages the audience to make a false—but apparently obvious—assumption, and the punchline shatters this assumption by presenting an incongruous situation. Depending on the assumption in question, such a joke may do more than simply show that the reader jumped to a false conclusion. Since these assumptions are the building blocks for diegetic worlds, these jokes can challenge not only the assumptions themselves, but the entire diegetic worlds that readers imagine based on these assumptions. Thus, false-assumption jokes can imply interpretations of diegetic worlds in their setups and then shatter those implications in their punchlines, suddenly supplying different diegetic worlds instead.

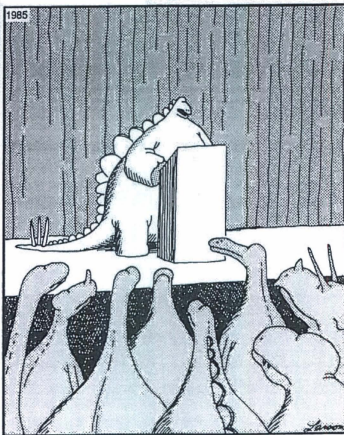
Since the punchlines of false-assumption jokes collapse specific assumptions, the setups must encourage readers to make these same assumptions. If readers do not make the correct assumptions based on the setups, then the punchlines are bound to fail. As such, these jokes frequently revolve around assumptions that are (seemingly) obvious elements of their diegeses. Additionally, if the assumption appears to be obvious in the setup, then the challenge to this assumption will make a surprising and forceful punchline. False-assumption jokes involve straightforward setups and incongruous punchlines. The setups establish expectations about the diegetic worlds, and the punchlines suddenly disrupt these expectations. These jokes are not important for their structure, but rather for the assumptions that they refute. Their setups present straightforward timing, sights, and sounds that easily combine into diegetic worlds. False-assumption jokes must encourage readers to draw assumptions readily and without reflection, leaving them unprepared for the sudden reversals of the assumptions in the punchlines.

This analysis raises two essential questions: what defines an “obvious” assumption, and how can jokes collapse them? The most “obvious” assumptions are those that appear to be necessary



based on the interrelations between elements of the strips. For example, should a setup depict a dog writing a dog advice column, an obvious assumption would be that the dog is literate. This aspect of the diegetic world is an (apparently) obvious deduction based on clues shown in the panels: the dog can read, and therefore he must be literate. A false-assumption joke could collapse this assumption by indicating that dogs do not possess the intellectual capacity for literacy. To continue the example, perhaps the dog tells his readers to keep toxic products hidden because dogs cannot read; the punchline invalidates the apparently clear implication of the setup. Such a punchline would suddenly change the interrelations between diegetic elements, comically challenging an assumption that previously seemed obvious and necessary. Interestingly, the diegetic world does not need to make sense after the punchline alters it, but it does need to make sense during the setup—or at least, the setup needs to encourage suspension of disbelief. The setup of a false-assumption joke must introduce an (apparently) obvious diegetic assumption, and an obvious assumption is one that makes sense. The punchline of such a joke only needs to challenge the implication of the setup; it does not need to restore order to the diegesis afterwards. Thus, all assumptions are fair game for false-assumption jokes, even if the strips cannot make sense without them. Readers make assumptions in order to understand the diegetic worlds of strips, and false-assumption jokes collapse these assumptions, potentially shattering diegetic worlds in the process.

A streamlined example of a false-assumption joke comes from a *Far Side* strip that features an incongruity in the form of a dinosaur in the room (Larson 87, ["Lecture"], fig. 5.3). The image shows a dinosaur at a podium in front of a curtain, with many other dinosaurs looking up expectantly from below; clearly the prehistoric orator is giving a speech or lecture. The caption below the image conveys a serious tone, with the dinosaur lecturer making the collegial statement, "The picture's pretty bleak, gentlemen," leading into a short list of the problems that threaten these terrible lizards with extinction. Though a speaking dinosaur is nonsensical in reality, speaking animals are conventional in comic strips such as *The Far Side*. Seasoned comics readers are probably accustomed to the idea of anthropomorphic talking animals, and even if they are not, the



"The picture's pretty bleak, gentlemen.... The world's climates are changing, the mammals are taking over, and we all have a brain about the size of a walnut."

Fig. 5.3. Larson 87, *Lecture*.

image and text of "Lecture" clearly imply that a dinosaur is speaking. The comedy of "Lecture" does not come from a talking dinosaur; rather, it comes from a talking dinosaur pointing out that it is impossible for a dinosaur to talk. The caption and image both imply that the speaker is a dinosaur of great intelligence, capable of lecturing on climate change and the rise of the mammals. However, the caption ends with the speaker stating, "we all have a brain about the size of a walnut" (87). The lecturing dinosaur has chosen a very intelligent way of telling his fellow dinosaurs that they are not very intelligent. It is the self-defeating nature of the dinosaur's statement that turns this final part of

the caption into the punchline of the strip. To accept the fiction of a dinosaur giving a speech, readers must suspend the knowledge that dinosaurs were not intelligent enough to communicate in this fashion. The punchline then confronts readers with the knowledge that the setup requires them to suspend, disproving the previous implication that these dinosaurs are intelligent. The punchline not only states that the diegesis is impossible, it even reveals (one reason for) why it is impossible, thereby comically noting that the lecturing dinosaur is an impossibility.

The comedy of "Lecture" comes not from the diegesis itself, but from the punchline's demolition of the diegesis's premises. The interpretive process for this strip is relatively straightforward. The image sets up a scenario, complete with a clear speaker (the dinosaur at the podium). The caption provides speech for the speaker, and ends with the punchline of the joke. This apparent simplicity allows for unambiguous self-reflexive comedy. The setup of "Lecture" establishes a diegetic world that the punchline satirizes. Therefore, the straightforward timing, sight, and sound of this strip are integral elements of the comedy. An effective setup is clear and unambiguous, and the setups for false-assumption jokes are no different. These jokes do not challenge the reading process by undermining how readers understand actions or sounds; rather, they challenge the diegetic worlds that readers create based on the strips. "Lecture" intentionally defeats itself in a comical self-satire, making a formalist joke out of the diegesis.

"Lecture" is formalist in the sense that it draws attention to its own fictional form, but challenges to the nature of fiction are not the limits of formalist comedy; false-assumption jokes can involve the visual form of comic strips as well. Since comics is a static visual medium, it must represent non-visual, non-static diegetic elements with stationary images. Therefore, though diegetic elements such as sound and action exist as visual symbols, the symbols themselves are not parts of the diegetic worlds. Readers make assumptions about the comics form in order to separate extra-diegetic visuals—such as speech balloons—from diegetic visuals—such as the characters near those balloons. Very few comics mark the distinctions between diegetic and extra-diegetic visuals (and those that do are often discussions of the comics form, such as Scott McCloud's

*Understanding Comics*). Rather, the vast majority of comics leave readers to interpret—or in other words, to assume—which visual elements exist inside and outside of the diegeses. These assumptions are essential to the comics reading process, allowing comics artists to use tools such as speech balloons and panel borders to signify sound and the passage of time respectively. For example, no matter how many speech balloons a comics reader has seen in the past, for each new balloon he or she must assume if it is a diegetic or extra-diegetic element based on in-panel clues. In the case of often-repeated symbols such as speech balloons, the symbol itself is usually enough of a clue to conclude that it exists outside of the diegetic world. By this point in the thesis, it may be obvious that these formalist assumptions are openings for comics comedy. Assumptions about the visual tools of comics are some of the most fundamental and automatic assumptions that comics readers make. Thus, challenges to these assumptions lead to some of the most potent examples of diegesis-based jokes.

Any comics symbol is a potential opening for false assumption jokes, but few symbols are as prevalent in comics as panel borders. These lines (usually) are the limits of the drawn panels, with no direct implications for the diegetic worlds of the strips. Panel borders typically have no relevance to diegetic worlds, and merely serve as components of real-world comics layouts.<sup>31</sup> In other words, panel borders are real-world objects that organize comics' representations of fictional worlds. Therefore, false-assumption jokes that challenge the nature of comics borders not only defy the audience's ability to interpret diegetic symbols; they also impose diegetic significance on real-world objects. An example of such a strip comes from Winsor McCay's 1904 comic strip entitled *Little Sammy Sneeze*. Every strip features a destructive sneeze from the aptly-named Sammy Sneeze, but one particularly simple strip forms an elegant example of a false-assumption joke (McCay 65, ["Sneeze"], fig. 5.4). "Sneeze" is six panels long, with four setup panels of Little Sammy inhaling before a sneeze. The setup appears to be standard comics fare, using four simple panels to establish that Little Sammy is preparing to sneeze. The images are very straightforward,

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31 As Section 3.2 states, panel borders limit the reader's view of the diegetic world, but do not necessarily limit the diegetic world.



Fig. 5.4. McCay 65, *Sneeze*.

consisting only of panel borders, Sammy, and onomatopoeic speech balloons signifying inhaling.

Though “Sneeze” comes from an early age of newspaper comics, it nonetheless leaves readers to assume that the balloons indicate sounds and the borders separate distinct moments in time. The punchline occurs in the fifth panel, showing that Sammy’s sneeze is so powerful that it shatters the very borders of the panel. This punchline not only depicts a surprisingly powerful sneeze; it also surprisingly incorporates the panel borders as diegetic elements of the strip.

Though the punchline brings the borders into the fictional world, the exact fictional nature of the borders is irrelevant. Perhaps Sammy is standing behind a hollow black square, or perhaps his

sneeze is so powerful that it punctures a hole through diegetic space-time. The punchline involves a diegetic event interacting with a non-diegetic object; it does not involve any explanation for how or why. This lack of explanation is not a shortcoming or oversight; rather, it supports my assertion that the strip challenges reader assumptions about the visual tools of comics. The joke is not based on the diegetic world *per se*; rather, it is based on undermining the audience's (probable) assumption that the panel borders are not part of the diegetic world. Sammy's sneeze shatters that assumption along with the panel borders, making a complex diegesis-based joke out of a simple setup.

While simple panels precede the punchline of "Sneeze," a deceptively simple panel follows it. The final panel of "Sneeze" has elements of self-aware diegesis jokes, but it nonetheless augments the strip's incongruous interpretation of seemingly normal comics symbols. Sammy's gaze in the final panel looks out of the comic and toward the audience, perhaps in response to panel five's diegetic incongruity. However, despite the structural similarities to self-aware diegesis jokes, this final panel further serves to ground "Sneeze" as a false-assumption joke. Sammy is not surprised or shocked that the panel borders collapsed around him; rather, he seems unmoved, or perhaps annoyed. Sammy's attitude in panel six is incongruous with the surprise that panel five cultivates in the audience. In other words, in spite of the surprising events of panel five, Sammy is not surprised at all in panel six. Thus, the final panel adds a deadpan element to the false assumption punchline of panel five, with Sammy not sharing the reader's surprise. The punchline of "Sneeze" challenges a reader assumption that is essential to the comics reading process, and the final panel builds the joke by implying that it was not a joke at all.

False-assumption jokes do more than simply show that readers have jumped to false conclusions; they comically collapse assumptions that appear to be essential to their diegeses. These assumptions appear necessary in the setups, ensuring that the challenges to these assumptions will be as surprising as possible. The punchlines then negate these assumptions that formerly seemed obvious, challenging the audience's ability to imagine the interrelations between diegetic elements.

The sudden diegetic incongruities may disrupt the building blocks of the fictional worlds, comically challenging the readers' constructions of the strips' diegeses. Thus, false-assumption jokes are a powerful form of diegesis-based joke, presenting diegetic worlds that are not nearly as straightforward as they may first appear.

#### **Section 5.4: Conclusion**

Diegesis-based jokes in comic strips can incorporate more than just reader-defying timing, sights, and sounds: they involve self-reflexive challenges to the very fictional nature of the strips. Imagining the diegetic world is the final step in interpreting a comics narrative, and formalist comics comedy can thrive through self-reflexive challenge to the diegesis. These challenges take two primary forms: jokes that present incongruities in their setups and address them in their punchlines, and jokes that present seemingly straightforward setups and complicate them with incongruous punchlines. These jokes are not significant because of their simple forms, but rather for the scope of their content. They do not use in-panel clues to cultivate incongruities in diegetic elements; rather, they use diegetic elements to cultivate incongruities in the fictional worlds of strips. Whether these strips present real-world perspectives on fictional events or cause readers to make false assumptions about the nature of the fictional world, these jokes rely on the fact that they are fictional. Diegesis-based jokes represent the final step of formalist comedy in comics. The comics form, with its tensions of image and text, provides a unique medium for authors to create fictional worlds. Allowing readers to unite these tensions into fictional worlds is the end goal of comics narratives, and the final outlet for comedy that is specific to the comics form. Always looking to exploit every possible avenue for comedy, comics comedians eventually turn inward as well, making jokes out of the fact that their work is a joking matter.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Comic strips have a unique set of structural conventions, and comics comedians can collapse expectations about these conventions to create formalist jokes; this thesis hinges around this claim about comics comedy. The chapters on timing, unseen sights, sounds, and diegetic worlds detail some of these structural conventions, and analyze jokes that are based on them. My analyses support the claim that formalist comics comedy defies reader expectations about the form. However, after reading my thesis, this claim may appear to be very basic. I do not quantify nearly all the nuances of comic strip comedy, nor do I contextualize any of the themes or metaphors that are prevalent in comic strip jokes. On the contrary, I simply make a general claim about this unique comedy form. I draw from an extensive list of primary sources, and I incorporate foundational theories from related disciplines. My central claim in this thesis is logical, defensible—and rudimentary, since comics comedy is a critically underrepresented field, and rudimentary claims are necessary to pave the way for more detailed analyses of the form.

First and foremost, such rudimentary claims about comics comedy are necessary because other scholars have yet to detail the basic properties of this comedy form. One primary cause of this critical neglect is the historical association between comic strips and popular culture. In the introduction to *Unpopular Culture*, Bart Beaty says that “as a medium with a long association with large-scale mass-market production, comics have generally been neglected by . . . scholars of culture” (14). Though Beaty does not point fingers, other comics scholars state that the medium’s long association with mass-market culture is due in large part to comic strips. In his article “How Comics Came to Be,” Robert C. Harvey states that the modern comics medium began “when, at the close of the nineteenth century, the great metropolitan daily newspapers (particularly in New York) sought to increase circulation by publishing Sunday supplements that included imitations of the comic weekly magazines” (29). In other words, comic strips began as glorified advertisements. Like Beaty, Harvey also claims that the mass popularity of comic strips informs scholarship on the medium (and by extension, informs the lack thereof). Harvey says that The Yellow Kid, the main



character of Richard F. Outcault's *Hogan's Alley*, "occupies his niche in the history of U.S. Newspaper cartooning not because he was actually the first newspaper comic character (he wasn't) but because he was the first newspaper comic character to prove he could sell newspapers" ("How Comics" 37). Harvey implies that the most historically relevant fact about a comic strip is how well it functions as an advertisement. In the introduction to *The System of Comics*, Thierry Groensteen reveals that comics' popularity skews criticism of the medium, claiming that "the artists who 'sell' are continually the object of fetishistic celebrations in which critical analysis has little place" (1). Writing in 1924, cultural critic Gilbert Seldes directly addresses the academic disdain for comic strips. Seldes states that, "Of all the lively arts the comic strip is the most [critically] despised, and with the exception of the movies it is the most popular. Some twenty million people follow with interest, curiosity, and amusement the daily fortunes of five or ten heroes of the comic strip, and that they do is considered by all those who have any pretensions to taste and culture as a symptom of crass vulgarity" (46). Seldes's strong words are proof that critical distaste for comic strips is not a new phenomenon, predating Beaty's observations of academic neglect by eighty-three years. Simply put, comic strips originated as and still are popular culture. This very popularity holds them back from reaching critical acclaim in the academy.

As academically damning as comic strips' popularity may be, it is not the only obstacle standing between them and a body of theory; their association with humour is another critical handicap. Thierry Groensteen addresses this handicap in "Why are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization," claiming that "it will suffice to note the rarity of studies on humor and comical effects . . . in order to verify that the seriousness of critics and teachers excludes any playful or funny contribution to artistic creation" (10). In the introduction to this thesis, I reveal that disdain for comedy permeates comics studies. In "The Voices of Silence," comics theorist David Kunzle rationalizes his distaste for comics comedy by claiming that "the visual arts are not organically humorous like the literary arts . . . . It is easier to be funny with words than the visualization of actions" (9). Kunzle further states that "this may be simply because we are taught to

communicate principally with words, and very secondarily with pictures" (9); however, despite any rationalization, the claim that it is difficult to be funny with images contradicts Kunzle's earlier claim that comics jokes are trivial. Kunzle continues that "in a silent strip, the burden of humor is necessarily carried by the drawings alone" (9), and silent comic strips—such as the "Abduction" strip from Section 2.3—show that drawings alone can carry the burden of humour. If funny images are difficult to create, that does not mean that academics should ignore comics comedy. Rather, it implies that academics must analyze these images to understand how comics comedians accomplish the difficult task of creating comic strips.

This thesis is one such analysis of comic strips. I look into how comics comedians manipulate their medium's unique set of structural conventions in order to create jokes that are specific to comics. Though my thesis deals with critically underrepresented subject matter, my analyses do not seek to establish that comic strips are worthy of study *per se*. Rather, I seek to demonstrate that the comic strip is a unique and nuanced comedy form, and this fact, in turn, implies that it merits critical attention. To this end I analyze jokes that rely on—rather than merely use—the comics form. I study jokes based on timing, unseen sights, sounds, and diegetic worlds in comic strips, and show how comics comedians create jokes by collapsing expectations about these aspects of comic strips.

Though my analyses take the critical legitimacy of their subject matter as given, I am writing about an academically underrepresented topic. My bibliography is mostly cobbled together from comics and comedy studies; the comic strip is the overlapping area between these two fields. Since few works examine comic strips specifically, I often have to rely on tangential applications of my secondary readings. Even the existing texts that privilege comic strips—such as Thomas M. Inge's *Comics as Culture* and Gilbert Seldes's "The 'Vulgar' Comic Strip"—tend to view comic strips as historical or cultural artifacts, rather than as examples of a distinct comedy form. Formalist analysis of comics comedy is rare enough to appear non-existent to someone searching for it. Thus, in order to analyze the form of comics comedy, I have to start at ground level. Using formalist studies of

comics and comedy as a foundation, I analyze what I consider to be the four main elements of formalist comics comedy: timing, unseen sights, sounds, and diegetic worlds. I determine that comics comedians challenge reader expectations about the comics form to collapse expectations about these elements for the sake of comedy. However important this determination may be, it is only a basic property of the comic strip form. My conclusions in this thesis may seem rudimentary in retrospect, and they are. My goal is not to make grand or sweeping claims about comic strips, but to combine primary evidence and foundational theories to make solid, logical, and defensible claims about the operation of comic strip jokes. In other words, in the absence of a body of formalist theory dealing with comic strip jokes, I have begun one myself.

This thesis is, above all, an initial foray into the formal analysis of comic strip jokes. It introduces critical approaches to the medium, but it does not exhaust or quantify all of the medium's nuances. As I mention in the body of the thesis, though I study timing, unseen sights, sounds, and diegetic worlds in isolation, few (to no) comic strip jokes collapse expectations about only one aspect of the form. Combining the concepts mentioned in my chapters hints toward the underlying formal complexity of comic strips. As a few arbitrary examples, what are the comical properties of in-panel sounds that originate off-panel (sounds whose origins are *hors champ* elements) versus off-panel sounds that are indicated by in-panel clues (sounds that are themselves *hors champ* elements)? Can a homophonic pun set up by an unseen source result in a punchline that is a verbal and visual pun simultaneously? What happens when an apparently coherent diegetic world forces readers to rationalize atypical panel interrelations? This is to say nothing of comic strips where multiple jokes work in tandem, or of the interrelation between comic strip comedy and visual design dichotomies such as "Given/New" (Kress 186-92) and "Ideal/Real" (Kress 193-202), or of sustained humour in long-form comedy comics (such as Ben Edlund's *The Tick* or Alan Moore's *Smax*). I do not attempt to answer such questions in this thesis; rather, I attempt to provide useful tools for building more detailed analyses of comic strip jokes.

Though my analyses of the timing, unseen sights, sounds, and diegetic worlds of comic

strips may be complex, my claim that unites these analyses is simple: comics comedians humorously collapse audience expectations about the comics form in order to create formalist jokes. This statement is an important step in the analysis of a medium that has eluded academic attention. In the absence of specific scholarship on the comic strip form, a formalist analysis of comic strips must apply theory relating to the form's constituent parts—comics and comedy. However, the comic strip is more than the combination of comics and comedy: it is a unique and nuanced comedy form, and one that merits critical attention. Comic strips are over a century old, and strips such as *The Far Side*, *Calvin and Hobbes*, and *Peanuts* are iconic examples of twentieth-century pop culture. The comic strip merits a specific body of theory. This thesis is a first step toward a greater understanding of the form.

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